Empire has been on my mind in recent months, and it’s been on my mind a lot this past week. Monday afternoon was devoted to a colloquium here in Christ Church about it, Tuesday evening saw a panel discussion in London about it, and Thursday evening was taken up with a school lecture in Northamptonshire about it. So, should, or should I not, I complete the week’s theme and talk to you about it?

I did hesitate, because it’s a dangerous thing for a preacher to ride his hobby-horse in the pulpit. And it can also be irresponsible, since a congregation is a captive audience who can’t shout back. (Well, they don’t usually.) So I gave the Spirit of God a chance to redirect me through the readings from Scripture appointed for the Sunday after Ascension Day. As it happens, both readings refer to empires and have nasty things to say about them. So I’ve taken that to be a divine green light.

First, though, I need to persuade you that the topic of empire is one worth thinking about. There are three reasons I can give you. One is that, if you’re British, then empire is part of your very recent past. There are still some living among us who were involved in running the British Empire. One was present here on Monday and several were at the London event on Tuesday. (They tend, by the way, to feel that their life’s work is being widely slandered.) On the other hand, there are those among us who think that the Empire was essentially oppressive and exploitative and that we British have yet to learn to confess our imperial sins and to make amends. So the first reason for taking an interest in empire has to do with our responsibility for the past.

The second reason has to do with the future. If you’re a Scottish nationalist, or if you stand politically far to the Left, then you probably think that Britain = Empire = Evil, and that the sooner Scotland repudiates the UK, or the sooner the UK repudiates its interfering past and settles down to become more like Ireland or Sweden, the better for
us and for the world. What we think about our imperial past shapes what we think Britain’s future should be.

The third reason for thinking about empire has to do with the reputation of the Christian Church. One of the main complaints against European empires is that they disrupted and interfered with the traditional ways of native peoples. And among the prime culprits of imperial interference were, of course, Christian missionaries.

So there are three reasons to think about empire: responsibility for Britain’s national past; the direction of Britain’s international future; and the reputation of the Church.

Time being very short in an Anglican cathedral pulpit, I can only do a few things this morning. First of all, I’ll comment on how Scripture directs our thinking about empire. Then I’ll comment on how I think a Christian should consider the three issues of responsibility for the past, the direction of the national future, and the reputation of the missionary Church.

So what does Scripture have to say about empire? In the past fifteen years, the idea that the Bible, and especially, the New Testament, is ‘anti-imperialist’ has become quite popular among biblical scholars, especially American ones. And both of our readings this morning would provide grist for their mill. In our reading from Isaiah the prophet looks forward to the come-uppance of the 6th century Babylonian empire in these terms: “How the oppressor has ceased! How his insolence has ceased! The Lord has broken the staff of the wicked, the sceptre of rulers, that struck down the peoples in wrath with unceasing blows, that ruled the nations in anger with unrelenting persecution….

You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; … But you are brought down to … the depths of the Pit’. Oppression, arrogance, ruthless brutality, suppression of a diversity of ‘nations’: these are the vicious marks of Babylonian empire.

Then in our second reading from the Revelation to St John, the author looks forward to the fall of another, later ‘Babylon’, the Roman Empire in the late 1st century AD. This is the empire, which under the emperor Domitian, had presided over the sporadic persecution of Christians. Hence the call, in verse 12, “for the endurance of the saints, those who … hold fast to the faith of Jesus” and the reference in verse 13 to those “who … die in the Lord”. Again: empire as bloodily oppressive, red in tooth and claw—as “the beast” (verse 9).
So is the Bible ‘anti-imperialist’? I don’t think it’s that simple. For starters, Israel itself was an empire of sorts, starting with the invasion of Canaan and expanding under King David. Next, the prophet Amos can be found speaking of ‘the nations’ as ruthlessly oppressive, too (Amos, Chapters 1 and 2). As for the Gospels, my own reading of them is that they have no particular complaint against Roman imperial rule: Roman centurions appear as paragons of faith; the problem with the Roman Governor, Pilate, is not that he’s too strong, but that he’s too weak—he yields to the baying mob roused by the Jewish religious establishment. Then in the Acts of the Apostles, Paul is rescued from a Jewish mob by Roman soldiers (Acts 23) and appeals to his rights as a Roman citizen (Acts 22.23-29). And in his Epistle to the Romans Paul claims that the governing, imperial authorities have been ordained by God to keep the peace (Romans 13.1-7). In brief, my own conclusion is that the Bible opposes oppressive, dehumanising rule in whatever form it comes—imperial, national, or religious—and that it does not always consider empire oppressive.

So ends my Cook’s tour of the Bible on empire. Let me now turn to comment, with hazardous brevity, on the three very large issues I’ve raised. First, Britain’s responsibility for its imperial past. Christians, of course, are familiar with the ideas of human sin and of the need for confession, repentance, and making amends. The natural home of these ideas is in relations between private persons. When they’re applied to relations between peoples or governments, their meaning become analogous and weaker—and all the more so when the political relations are historic. So when, in 1997, Tony Blair publicly apologised to the Irish people in the 1840s, he wasn’t exactly repenting and asking forgiveness. After all, he, Tony Blair, wasn’t responsible for what happened over a century before he was born.

So responsibility for the national past is not a straightforward matter. But even if we British today are responsible, say, for the two centuries of slavery in the Empire, we aren’t solely responsible. The descendants of the African chiefs who sold other Africans as slaves are responsible, too. As are the descendants of the Arab slave-traders who bought the slaves and brought them to the European ships on the coast. If there is to be a reckoning, it needs to be a comprehensive one.

And it also needs, somehow, to set credits against debits. For the British did ‘repent’ of slavery and abolished, first the trade in 1807, and then the institution in 1833. And then they did a kind of penance by committing themselves to suppress the slave-trade across the Atlantic, in Africa, and even in South-East Asia, and this they did for over a century
into the early 1900s. According to one historian of slavery, the British Empire’s anti-
slavery policy was the first state-sponsored suppression of the slave trade in the history of
the world.

Time presses, so I must let the issue of responsibility for the past rest there. What about
the issue of the direction of the Britain’s international future? If it were true that Britain’s
imperial dominance was nothing but a litany of oppression and exploitation and
damaging cultural disruption, then we might well conclude, as Scottish nationalists and
others on the far Left would have us conclude, that British (and more generally Western)
interference is the prime cause of global misery and that the best thing we could do is
repudiate our imperial past and leave the rest of the world to its own devices—or at least
to the collective wisdom of the United Nations. Since I don’t think that the history of
the British Empire was simply a litany of vice and injury, and since the United Nations is
not an impartial government but a highly politicized forum for, at best, occasional
international cooperation, I really don’t think that the world would be better off if
Britain were to retire from responsibility for international order.

What’s more as a Christian I do believe that the whole world is the creation of the one,
good God, and that it shares in God’s moral coherence. In other words, I think that there
is a moral order, whose principles are universal, even if their cultural incarnations are
particular and diverse. As our reading from the Revelation to St John says, “there is an
eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and
language and people”. Christians, therefore, cannot take the view that all cultures are
equal, and they do have a duty to lobby their own government to defend and promote
those cultures that best embody values and norms.

Which brings us to our third and last issue, the reputation of the missionary Church.
The work of Christian missions was undoubtedly facilitated by the growth of European
empires. And missionaries certainly did disturb indigenous customs and traditions—which is why imperial officials tended to regard them as a nuisance, threatening the
peace. So when we hear of the killing of an elderly female missionary in Kenya by a
group of enraged Kikuyu in January 1930, we might be inclined to lend our sympathies
to the Kikuyu. But then when we learn that this missionary’s particular cultural
interference was public opposition to female genital mutilation, I imagine that our moral
sympathies will shift. It’s difficult to be a Christian and not to think that some things
really deserve to be changed—and change involves disturbance.
One of the most powerful recent defences of colonial missionary endeavour and change comes from a most unlikely source—and with this I will draw to a close. The source is the testimony of Matthew Parris, one-time Conservative MP, regular columnist for the Times newspaper, and now confessed atheist. Ten years ago, Parris published an article in which he reported on a recent trip he’d made back to Malawi, where he’d spent his childhood. This is what he wrote:

travelling in Malawi refreshed … [a] belief … I’ve been trying to banish all my life, but an observation I’ve been unable to avoid since my African childhood.… [The observation is this]. We had friends who were missionaries, and as a child I stayed often with them; I also stayed, alone with my little brother, in a traditional rural African village. In the city we had working for us Africans who had converted and were strong believers. The Christians were always different. Far from having cowed or confined its converts, their faith appeared to have liberated and relaxed them. There was a liveliness, a curiosity, an engagement with the world – a directness in their dealings with others – that seemed to be missing in traditional African life. They stood tall.

[This] confounds my ideological beliefs, [and] stubbornly refuses to fit my world view… Now a confirmed atheist, I’ve become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa: sharply distinct from the work of secular NGOs, government projects and international aid efforts. These alone will not do. Education and training alone will not do. In Africa Christianity changes people’s hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good.

I don’t for a moment suppose that you will all agree with my views, but I do commend the topic of empire to you as something that deserves your attention and reflection. For, whether you are British or Christian or both, you do have a stake in it.