

God or Mammon; a vision for the future

Sermon at Churchill Chapel on Sunday 14 June 2026

by Nigel Cooper

[The sermon actually delivered was a reduced version of this. Most of the omitted portions are marked in square brackets.]

Psalm 72

OT

Mt 20. 1-16

“Finding the world a confusing place? Already consulted Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Bagehot and Marx?”¹ This was the start of a heading for an article on Professor Shruti Patel and her views on what insights India can bring to political thought. As I read it I thought, why is Jesus not in this list of political thinkers? Okay, he did not have a worked-out theory of politics. Even so, we have in the Synoptic Gospels access to some of his thought. Many of his parables are about the Kingdom of Heaven, or reign of God, as some translators prefer. These set out a political vision for this new world order.

Although I have learned from many contemporary political and economic thinkers, as well as breathing in the culture that owes so much to the Classical ancients, the thrust of my political views comes from the Bible and Jesus in particular.

[My parents were conservative, read the Telegraph, and were annoyed that they shared the same Christian names, Harold and Mary, as the then Labour PM and his wife: Harold and Mary Wilson. That familial prejudice remains, except that my criticism of it Labour is from the Left. In mentioning this, I want to be frank up front: this is no dinner party where we should keep off religion and politics. I hope in this chapel we can remain a community where we communicate our differences while remaining in communion with one another. You are absolutely welcome to disagree with me, either quietly or verbally.]

I have led a comfortable and sheltered life, and yet it seems to me that the world is seriously awry. I almost feel tempted to vote Reform, that is until I see a photo of Nigel Farage – oh, the irony of shared Christian names! I had a dear friend, now departed, who taught at Dulwich College over the time Farage was a pupil there. Apparently Farage was an outstandingly snotty teenager even then.]

Last year I was introduced to a book by Mark Fisher, “Capitalist realism; is there no alternative?”². It has something of a cult following. It is short and worth reading (well, I think so. Bridget is not so sure). It is too rich to easily summarise. I might say that he points out that our general thinking is dominated by ‘Capitalist Realism’. That is, the conviction that the current Capitalist system is the only one available, the only realistic system in town. The one shared by all the adults in the room while any other visions are just childish nonsense.

[This way of thinking was established in the Thatcher-Regan era. Those with long memories will remember Thatcher’s slogan, There is no alternative, TINA. And this somehow became accepted despite long periods of massive unemployment in the 80s. It was consolidated in the 1990s by the fall of the Berlin Wall with the extension of Capitalism to eastern Europe. Francis Fukuyama’s “The

1 Cambridge Alumni Magazine, Lent Term 2026, p35

2 Zero Books, 2009. And a later second edition with some other people’s reflections on Fisher, who had died.

End of History”³ in 1992 assumed the perpetual victory of TINA. This confidence was temporarily jolted by the 2008 financial crash, but it was quickly propped up by governments at the cost of austerity for the masses in the 2010s.]

Fisher might have used the term ‘The Imaginary’ rather than realism. I find it a more helpful term. Here is one definition of the Imaginary to explain it: the social imaginary is "the creative and symbolic dimension of the social world, the dimension through which human beings create their ways of living together and their ways of representing their collective life"⁴ It is an assumed pattern of thought, speech and action. They seem real as they are almost universally shared in a particular culture. Although these make up an imaginary world, in that there are a multitude of alternative imaginary worlds, they lead to real world social structures and patterns of behaviour. We live in this imaginary-cum-social world with hardly a question, accepting that there is no alternative. It is just common sense.

However, in the past five years the cracks in the Capitalist Realism, or Imaginary, are beginning to become obvious and people are now questioning it in their voting behaviour. We have had the playful chaos of Johnson, as if in an imaginary world you could have your cake and eat it. And now, with Starmer⁵, we have the ‘adults’ back in the room, being sensible and embracing Capitalist Realism, and demonstrating it is no longer working. The next political stop, God help us, is ReformUK. Theirs is an effective ruse to enhance all the benefits of neo-liberal capitalism for the super-rich while distracting the masses, mainly by racism and immigration. There is the danger of oppression of all who pose a threat to this con trick, as we see in the USA. There has been a cartoon around many years now. I think it expresses this so well I shall describe it in words. Three people sit round a table in a cafe and a waiter brings a plate of ten cakes. The capitalist takes nine cakes and says to the voter, pointing to the immigrant, “Watch that man, he is after your cake!” Reform appeals as it is easier and more effective to deprive those below you than those above you.

It is no coincidence that the environment has become a contested issue. Although populations can be induced to dwell within a Capitalist Realism Imaginary, the rest of nature cannot be so coopted. Nature in its diversity responds to our human Capitalist world in its independent way. To our carbon emissions it develops complex meteorological changes not to our advantage. As we over-harvest or land-take, many species diminish or become extinct. As we link the earth together ever more through globalisation, so other species multiply and spread as pests and diseases. [The question is, is Malthus still wrong? My simplistic overview is coloured by my identity as an evolutionary biologist. Malthus was basically right in proposing that human populations were constrained by food supply etc.. He has been proved wrong so far in that human ingenuity and the discovery of fossil fuels have allowed the human population to rise to nine billion or so. Are we now bumping into the planetary boundaries? The Stockholm Resilience Centre certainly thinks we are⁶. Sir David Attenborough, speaking to journalists at Davos in 2019, cited the old joke that anyone who thinks you can have infinite growth in finite circumstances is “either a madman or an economist”⁷. It is somewhat ironic that the key factor that has allowed humans to evade the ecological laws that constrain all other species, that is the deployment of fossil fuels, will be the key factor that will limit human population. As a biologist I am convinced that the science has it and that the economists are deeply and tragically wrong.] “It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.”⁸

3 Strictly Francis Fukuyama’s “The End of History and the Last Man”

4 Thompson, John Brookshire (1984). *Studies in the Theory of Ideology*. Oxford: Blackwell

5 This was before Starmer resigned and Burnham became PM.

6 [Planetary boundaries - Stockholm Resilience Centre](#)

7 ["Anyone who believes in exponential growth in a..."](#) Apparently, this is first attributed to the British-born economist giving evidence to Congress in 1973.

8 Fisher attributes this saying to either Slavoj Zizek or Fredrick Jameson, but I have not been able to track it down any better than this.

Let me share an experience. Fifteen or so years ago, Archbishop Rowan Williams convened a day conference on the environment. In the afternoon there was a panel discussion and one of the panellists was a financier from the City. At one point he expostulated to us environmentalists in the room, “You have to live in the real world!” Sharp intake of breath in the room. Which was more real, carbon dioxide molecules or numbers on a financial spreadsheet? Capitalist realism displayed by a true adult in the room.

[That’s enough of my amateur social analysis. I must turn to my presumed expertise of religion, the reason I abandoned the politics of my family.]

The sub-title of Fisher’s book is *is there no alternative?*. So I ask, can religion, can Christianity in particular, offer an alternative imaginary that will be more felicitous in human and natural affairs. What sort of human society is envisaged in Jesus’s talk of the Kingdom of God or Heaven?

The very phrase sounds awkward to us: monarchist, anti-democratic, top-down commanding. In the first century, however, it referred to the ideals of kingship in ancient Israel. Much of the Hebrew Bible explains that the role of the king was to protect his people from slavery to foreign empires and to protect his people from the powerful within the nation, who might exploit its weaker inhabitants. All this was within the framework of a God-given law, which the king had to uphold. If the king did all this, then furthermore, relationships with nature would go well too. This evening’s psalm illustrates this⁹. The human king was to model himself on the kingly rule of God, protecting his people and taking the side of the poor. What a surprise, it did not always work out that way! The Deuteronomic history has a lengthy warning against kings as people who will take your sons and daughters and put them to work on his projects, who will take the best of your fields and give them to courtiers and take a tenth of your grain to pay his army officers etc.¹⁰.

There is the fabulous Law of the Jubilee in Leviticus 25. For forty-nine years normal trade may lead people into debt and this may force them to sell their family’s land, their patrimony, or even to sell themselves and their children into slavery. However, every forty-ninth year both land and slaves are redeemed; people are set free and their land returned to them¹¹. There are many other laws in the Hebrew Bible that are admirable for their time.

Turning to Jesus, he picks up and radicalises these social laws. Whether any text represents the exact wording or not, this theme is so strong that it must go back to Jesus himself. Here are some of them important for me.

[Luke starts off Jesus’s ministry with a scripture reading in the synagogue at Nazareth. Jesus stands up to read the bible passage and selects Isaiah 61, verses 1-2, as follows:

He stood up to read, ...

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour. [i.e. the Year of Jubilee]’

9 Psalm 72

10 I Samuel 8

11 It is not clear if this law was ever fully followed, but it set a clear touchstone for justice.

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’¹²

Jesus has come to inaugurate the full reign of God.] Luke’s version of the beatitudes, probably retaining the original, material reference, unlike Matthew’s spiritualising of them, goes as follows: Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

‘Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
‘Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
...
‘But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.
‘Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.’¹³

This is illustrated in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the homeless beggar. Lazarus dies and goes to heaven, but the rich man to hell. The rich man in hell calls out to Abraham and receives this reply,

“Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.”¹⁴

Which brings us to the title of this sermon with its reference to Matthew 6.24:

‘No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon [meaning roughly wealth or possessions]’.

Of course, there are also the radical verses in the Magnificat, which we have just sung or heard.

“He hath put down the mighty from their seat : and hath exalted the humble and meek.
He hath filled the hungry with good things : and the rich he hath sent empty away.”

Then, our Gospel reading was the parable of the labourers in the vineyard from Matthew 20. This parable overturns our natural assumption that people should be rewarded for their work. Firstly, the owner of the vineyard keeps going to the market place throughout the day to ensure that no one is left without work. Then at the end of the day he pays everyone the same pay, the standard wage for a day’s work, whether they worked all day or just the last hour. He pays them according to need. The parable ends with the refrain, “The last will be first and the first last.” This really is radical equity.

This sample of scriptural material no way adds up to a political or economic programme for government. It offers some principles such as the need for radical wealth and power equity, but does not explain how to achieve this for society at large. It merely assumes that these are principles that small religious groups could exhibit. [Moreover, the new Christian communities were far too small to influence the Roman empire, so an election manifesto was hardly needed. Later, of course, the empire embraced Christianity – but on its own terms! Many argue that the Constantinian settlement led the Church to sell out to the World. Certainly, the emperors did not follow the gospel

12 Luke 4. 16-21

13 Luke 6. 20-25

14 Luke 16. 25

injunctions such as “Jesus said, ‘You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will not be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave;’”^{15]}

Yet the first vision was never lost and groups of Christians have continued to try to live out these principles. At the political level, in the recent period the Roman Catholic Church has led the way in developing detailed thinking on how the biblical teaching might be applied to society at large in the modern world. This is referred to as ‘Catholic Social Teaching’ and is widely respected beyond the Roman Communion. Its rise is usually dated to *Rerum novarum*, the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII in 1891; its title is Latin for ‘of revolutionary change’. It addressed the challenges brought by industrialism and capitalism and was critical of both Marxism and capitalism. It included this notable statement: *A small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the labouring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself.* [It is of great significance that the new pope decided to adopt the name Leo XIV. [Key developments in Catholic Social Teaching since then include principles of the Common Good, the Preferential Option for the Poor, and Care for Creation.] But is there any point in having such a vision in a cynical world? Adults know that you always have to placate the rich and powerful.

Contrariwise, Jesus is also noted for his positive evaluation of children in a society very different from our own. This extended to this admonition: “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”¹⁶ I think this is of surprising importance in interpreting Christian social teaching. Alongside the egalitarian vision of the Kingdom of Heaven, we are here provided with an operational maxim on how to work towards it. I take from it the need for the fresh hope, the hope of children and their ambitions not yet tempered by the adoption of the contemporary social imaginary around them. The fresh thinking this releases can lead to new imaginaries which may shape new social worlds.

Just last week, an example of this almost naive and childish vision was published. I speak of the Global Justice Report¹⁷. A key lead in this is the French economist, Thomas Piketty, who has pioneered the detailed analysis of data to demonstrate the accumulation of capital by the super-rich over the past forty years. The key, Piketty explains, is to address inequality and planetary habitability together. This report shows what is possible. Will it, and those who use it, build both vision and implementation to overcome the super-rich in bringing in radical reform of international institutions and massive wealth taxes? Failure, although likely, cannot bear thinking about. The personal sacrifices and the willingness to give one’s life that are likely to be necessary are not foreign to the teaching of Jesus, of course.

That this type of vision is not mere vision is recorded in the data Piketty studied. From about 1920 to 1980 the trend was of increasing equality. Of particular note is the establishment in Britain after the Second World War of things like: the welfare state, the NHS, nationalisation and progressive taxation. It has been done before and can be done again.

Those of you who are students will be graduating from Cambridge either in a week or two or in a year or two. What shall you do with your lives thereafter? I would encourage you to become like little children, holding onto that element in your lives. Get stuck in to building a better world with the fresh thought of youth and its ambitions. Do all you can not to grow up in that respect. Don’t become the ‘adults in the room’, jaded by stories of failure, in awe of the powerful, imprisoned by the current Imaginary. Don’t be taken in by Capitalist Realism and its There is no Alternative.

¹⁵ Matthew 20:25-27

¹⁶ Matthew 18.3

¹⁷ <https://globaljusticeproject.wid.world/>

Instead, catch the vision of people like Jesus and moderns like Piketty, of a fairer, happier, nature-rich world. It may cost you a lot, but it will be a life worth living. I hope to live to hear reports of you like this quotation I have adapted from the Acts of the Apostles:

‘These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also... . They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the *world*, saying that there is another *way*, the *way of peace and justice*, once named *the Kingdom of Heaven*.’¹⁸

Go from here and turn the world upside down.

18 Acts 17.6-7: When they could not find them, they dragged Jason and some believers[a] before the city authorities, shouting, ‘These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has entertained them as guests. They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus.’