

Heaven, hell & God's love

1. Introduction

- What happens when we die?
- What does it mean to be *saved*?
- What do we hope for after death?

Is the source of our hope simply the belief that after we die we will all go to heaven – that is, our salvation will be *away from* this world.

Or may we genuinely have hope for our present world?

Belief about death

In the wider world, belief about death comes in all shapes and sizes.

There is a world of difference between:

1. a Muslim who might believe that a Palestinian boy (or terrorist) who is killed by Israeli soldiers goes straight to heaven where seven virgins are waiting for him and
2. a Hindu for whom the rigorous outworking of karma means that one must return in a different body to pursue the next stage of one's destiny.

There is a world of difference between:

3. the Orthodox Jew who believes that all the righteous will be raised to new individual bodily life in the resurrection, and
4. the Buddhist who hopes after death to disappear like a drop in the ocean, losing one's own identity in the great nameless and formless Beyond.

What do the dead do / what are they up to now?

In parts of Africa the ancestors still play a large role in communal and family life. There are complex systems for seeking their help or preventing them from making mischief. Before we just conclude that this is only confined to 'primitive' people, we must remember that many Japanese families have shrines in their homes to their departed parents on which regular offerings are made, and sometimes carry with them some part of their bones to ensure protection. Does our own fascination with relics speak of something similar?

- *The way we celebrate funerals in our society speaks volumes about our understanding of death. What is the best funeral you have ever been to? Why? What is the worst funeral you have ever been to? Why?*
- *Take a moment to talk to your neighbour about (1) your own belief about death and (2) what the dead are up to right now!*

In the Creed, we profess belief in the final two lines:

“We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.”

Current belief in death

There are three main candidates for what most people believe happens when someone dies, and none of them correspond with what traditional, orthodox Christianity professes.

1. *Complete annihilation.* There is absolutely nothing after death, and both the body and spirit (if such a thing exists in the first place) vanish. This possibility is clean and tidy.
2. *Reincarnation.* Popular in New Age and Hindu circles, and recognised in the popularity of some self-help guides which encourage the exploration of aspects of your personality that come from who you were or what happened to you in a previous life.
3. *Absorption into the wider world – into the wind and trees.* After the death of Princess Diana, one message left expresses this belief well: “I did not leave you at all. I am still with you. I am in the sun and in the wind. I am even in the rain. I did not die, I am with you all.” Some Christians think that this kind of belief is really what we mean when we talk about the immortality of the soul or the resurrection of the dead. One, unfortunately, encounters something like this kind of belief in many funerals and memorial services. You also see this in the practice of placing various objects like photographs, jewellery, teddy bears, etc, in the coffin – is this in order to offer some comfort to the deceased?

In like manner, even after more than a century of secularism, popular belief in the existence and activity of ghosts and the possibility of spiritualistic contact with the dead remains. Likewise, things like the rising popularity of Halloween and the cult surrounding Elvis defy belief!

So what, exactly, is it that we believe happens after death? And what is the consequence of this belief? Or is it better to talk about variations in what ‘life-after-death’ might mean? And what does the word ‘resurrection’ actually mean, and why do Christians say that we believe it?

The nature of paradise

Traditionally, most would assume that Christianity teaches about a heaven above – to which the saved/blessed go – and a hell below, for the wicked and impenitent. If we are good throughout our lives (follow the commandments, love our neighbours, do good things, attend Church, put money on the plate) then we will be rewarded with eternal life in heaven. Others (usually mass-murders, armed robbers, perpetrators of war crimes and sometimes paedophiles) will spend eternity in the fires of hell.

God does not intend for death to have its way with us. If the promised final future is simply that immortal souls will have left behind mortal bodies – then death still rules. If we spend eternity in heaven as disembodied souls, then death is not defeated, it still rules. That view of heaven is just death redescribed – death seen from another angle.

But this is not Christian belief. In the old days, which you can still see when you walk around a cemetery in Europe – people were all buried facing east, so as to rise to meet the Lord at his coming. Because after death there will be a time of intermediate sleep to be followed by a new bodily life at some future point.

This is why the Church also opposed the practice of cremation, for fear that people would thereby deny this hope of a future bodily resurrection. Such restrictions have been lifted for Catholics, although it is a practice that is still completely opposed by Eastern Orthodox Christians, orthodox Jews and Muslims. The main religions that have practiced cremation are Buddhism and Hinduism with their sense of being returned to nature in death.

(Two things: Catholics are not allowed to scatter their ashes in a river, along a hillside, etc – they must be kept intact in a single place. It is good practice to allow the bereaved to have a specific place that they can come to visit in their grief. Second, the common practice of celebrating the funeral liturgy in a Crematorium Chapel – a place that is used for nothing else – is a world-apart from the celebration of a Requiem Mass in a church that is used each day for prayer, Eucharist, reconciliation, celebrations of baptisms, weddings and other sacraments.)

Eternal life?

A ruler / lawyer came up to Jesus and asked him a question.

“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 18:18)

You may have been asked the question: ‘if you were to die tonight, what would happen to you? Would you go to heaven or hell?’ The answer is usually about committing your life to God, personal relationship, etc. But that idea is not biblical – the phrase ‘personal relationship with Jesus’ is not found in the Gospels, in Paul’s letters, in the letters or writings of Peter, James, John or Hebrews. The idea has only been around for about a century.

So when Jesus is asked the question about ‘eternal life’, you expect him to say something about praying the special salvation prayer. But he doesn’t.

Luke 18:19-30 And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honour your father and mother.’ ”

21 And he said, “All these I have kept from my youth.” When Jesus heard this, he said to him, “One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” But when he heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, “How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!

25 For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”

Those who heard it said, “Then who can be saved?” But he said, “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” And Peter said, “See, we have left our homes and followed you.” And he said to them, “Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life.”

2 ages: ha-olam hazeh = ‘the present age’ and ha-olam ha-ba = ‘the age to come.’

- *zoe aionios* = ‘the life of the age to come’
- John 3:16 – is somewhat different when it is translated properly!

The Biblical teaching

In fact, there is very little in the Bible about ‘going to heaven when you die.’ Many people presume that when the Bible speaks of ‘heaven’ it refers to the place where the saved will go after death. Also, when we hear Jesus talking about entering the kingdom of God, which in Matthew’s gospel is always described as the ‘kingdom of heaven’, suppose that Jesus is talking about ‘how to get to heaven when you die.’

This is not the language of heaven in the NT. The ‘kingdom of God’ in the preaching of Jesus is not about post-mortem destiny nor about our escape from this world into another one, but about God’s sovereign rule coming ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’

This seems to surprise many Christians.

Many Christians are more inclined to believe that there is something deeply suspect about the present world, our current bodies and regard them as shameful and shabby. This is a result of a lingering Platonism and continuing dualism that has infected whole swathes of Christianity for the past two millennia.

- Read *Revelation* chapters 4 and 5. What is this a vision of? (24 elders casting their crowns before the throne of God and the Lamb, beside the sea of glass and so on) Some presume that this a picture of the last day – no, it is an image of the *present reality*, that is, the heavenly dimension of our present life. Heaven, when it is spoken about in the bible, is not usually about a future destiny, but it is about the hidden dimension of our ordinary life >> the dimension of God’s true life in our current world.
- Read Genesis 1¹ “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,” and Gen 2¹ “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished and all their multitude.” Gen 2^{4b} “In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens.”

It is not until you get to Rev 21 and 22 that we are presented with the end of the world: what do we find? Not ransomed souls making their way to a disembodied heaven – but the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, uniting the two in a new and lasting embrace in a great wedding banquet.

But that may be jumping the gun a little – let us quickly take a look at some key biblical passages about heaven, paradise and the final days.

Hope - what the whole world's waiting for

The early Christians did not believe in 'progress.' They did not think the world was getting better and better under its own steam—or even under the steady influence of God. They knew God had to do something fresh to put it to rights.

But nor did they believe that the world was getting worse and worse and that their task was to escape it altogether. They were not dualists.

Since most people who think about these things today tend towards one or other of those two points of view, it comes as something of a surprise to discover that the early Christians held a quite different view. They believed that God was going to do for the whole cosmos what he had done for Jesus at Easter.

Fundamental structures of hope

- First, the *goodness of creation*.

NB—it is good as *creation*, not as an independent or self-sufficient 'nature'. [There is no suggestion of pantheism, or even panentheism.]

Within biblical theology it remains the case that the one living God created a world that is other than himself, not contained within himself. Creation was from the beginning an act of love, of affirming the goodness of the other. God saw all that he had made, and it was very good; but it was not itself divine. At its height, which according to Genesis 1 is the creation of humans, it was designed to *reflect* God, both to reflect God back to God in worship and to reflect God into the rest of creation in stewardship. But this image-bearing capacity of humankind [the *capex Dei*] is not in itself the same thing as divinity.

- Second, then, the *nature of evil*.

Evil is real and powerful, within biblical theology, but it consists neither in the fact of being created, nor in the fact of being other than God (since being loved into life by the one God is quite good enough!), nor yet in the fact that it's made of physical matter and belongs within space and time, instead of being pure spirit in an eternal heaven. Nor—and this is crucial—does evil consist in being transient, made to decay.

There is nothing wrong with the tree dropping its leaves in the autumn. There is nothing wrong with the sunset fading away into darkness. Transience acts as a god-given signpost, pointing not from the material world to a non-material world, but from the world as *it is* to the world *as it is meant one day to be*; pointing, in other, words, from the present to the future which God has in store.

The human project, of bringing wise order to the garden, is not yet complete, and without transience we might the more easily be led into idolatry, treating the creature as though it was the creator.

Evil then consists, not in being created, but in the rebellious idolatry by which humans worship and honour elements of the natural world rather than the God who made them.

- Third, the *plan of redemption*.

Precisely because creation is the work of God's love, redemption is not something alien to the creator, but something he will undertake with delight and glad self-giving. The point about redemption is that it doesn't mean scrapping what's there and starting again from a clean slate, but rather liberating what has come to be enslaved. The slavery consists, rather, in sin, redemption from which must ultimately involve not just goodness of soul or spirit but a newly embodied life. This is the plan which, throughout the Bible, is articulated in terms of God's choice of Israel as the means of redemption, and then, after the long and chequered story of God and Israel, God's sending of his son, Jesus. Incarnation then is the centre and fulfilment of the long-term plan of the good and wise creator.

Redemption is not simply making creation a bit better, as the optimistic evolutionist would try to suggest. Nor is it rescuing spirits and souls from an evil material world, as the gnostic would want to say. It is the remaking of creation, having dealt with the evil which is defacing and distorting it. And it is accomplished by the same God, now known in Jesus Christ, through whom it was made in the first place.

Differences of language:

- Mark/Luke: "kingdom of God"
- Matthew: "kingdom of heaven."

Jesus, heaven and new creation

The ascension

Belief that Jesus of Nazareth has been raised from the dead is closely linked in the New Testament with the belief that he has been taken into heaven, where, in the words of the Psalm, he has been seated at the right hand of God.

Only when we grasp and celebrate the fact that Jesus has gone on ahead of us into God's space, God's new world, and is both already ruling the rebellious present world as its rightful Lord and also interceding for us at the father's right hand—when we grasp and celebrate, in other words, what the ascension tells us about Jesus' continuing *human* work in the present—only then are we rescued from a wrong view of world history and equipped for the task of justice in the present.

The ascension thus speaks of the Jesus who remains truly human, and hence in an important sense absent from us while in another equally important sense present to us in a new way. At this point the Holy Spirit on the one hand, and the sacraments on the other, become enormously important, since they are precisely the means by which Jesus is present. This also means of course that these ways that Jesus is present also point to his simultaneous absence. There are other things over and above his presence with us, such as the lordship of Jesus; the fact that there is already a human being at the helm of the world; his present intercession for us; all this is.

Now it is of course one thing to say all this, to show how it fits together and sets us free from some of the nonsenses we would otherwise get into. It's quite another to be able to envisage or imagine it, to know what it is we're really talking about when we speak of Jesus being still human, still in fact an *embodied* human—actually, a *more solidly embodied* human than we are—but absent from this present world. We need, in fact, a new and better cosmology, a new and better way of thinking about the world.

The early Christians, and their fellow first-century Jews, were not, as many modern thinkers have supposed, locked into thinking of a three-decker universe with heaven up in the sky and hell down beneath their feet. When they spoke of 'up' and 'down' like that they were using metaphors that were so obvious that they didn't need spelling out. As some recent writers have pointed out, when a pupil at school moves 'up a form', from (say) the fifth grade to the sixth grade, it is unlikely that this means relocating to a classroom on the floor above. And though the move 'up' from vice-chairman to chairman of the board may indeed mean that at last you get an office in the penthouse suite, it would be quite wrong to think that 'moving up' in this context meant merely being a few feet further away from *terra firma*.

The mystery of the ascension is of course just that, a mystery. It demands that we think what is, to many today, almost unthinkable: that we recognize that when the Bible speaks of ‘heaven’ and ‘earth’ it isn’t talking about two localities related to each other within the same space-time continuum, nor yet about a ‘non-physical’ world on the one hand and a ‘physical’ one on the other, but about two different *kinds* of what we call ‘space’, two different kinds of what we call ‘matter’, and also, quite possibly (though this does not necessarily follow from the other two), two different kinds of what we call ‘time’. We post-Enlightenment westerners are such wretched flatlanders. Although New Age thinkers, and indeed quite a lot of contemporary novelists, are quite capable of taking us into other parallel worlds, spaces and times, we retreat into our rationalistic closed-system universe as soon as we think about Jesus. C S Lewis of course did a great job, in the Narnia stories and elsewhere, of imagining how two worlds could relate and interlock. But the generation that has grown up knowing its way around Narnia has not usually been helped to see how to make the transition from a children’s story to the real world of grown-up Christian devotion and theology.

Some church buildings have done their best to indicate the interrelation of heaven and earth. The Eastern Orthodox churches do it by envisaging ‘heaven’ as the inner sanctuary, the space around the altar, and ‘earth’ as the part of the building outside that space. The two are separated by the iconostasis upon which are portrayed the saints whose presence in ‘heaven’ is not far from the worshippers on ‘earth’. Western cathedrals and abbeys have often done a similar thing through soaring Gothic architecture, giving us at floor level a sense of belonging within (but unable at the moment to inhabit more than a little of) great spaces of light and beauty into which, significantly, only our music can penetrate.

All such aids to the Christian imagination are to be welcomed as long, of course, as they are not mistaken for the real thing. What we are encouraged to grasp precisely through the ascension itself is that God’s space and ours—heaven and earth, in other words—are, though very different, not far away from one another. Nor is talk about ‘heaven’ simply a metaphorical way of talking about our own spiritual lives. God’s space and ours interlock and intersect in a whole variety of ways, even while they retain, for the moment at least, their separate and distinct identities and roles. One day they will be joined in a quite new way, open and visible to one another, married together for ever.

<<< END OF PART ONE >>>

[optional – if there is time]

The redemption of our bodies

1. Introduction

The traditional picture of people ‘going to heaven’ on the one hand or ‘going to hell’ on the other, as a one-stage post-mortem journey (with or without the option of some kind of ‘purgatory’ or ‘continuing journey’ as an intermediate stage), represents a serious distortion and diminution of the Christian hope. Bodily resurrection is not just one odd bit of that hope. It is the element which gives shape and meaning to the rest of the story we tell about God’s ultimate purposes.

Instead of talking vaguely about ‘heaven; and then trying to fit the language of resurrection into that, we should talk with biblical precision about the resurrection, and reorganize our language about heaven around *that*.

2. Resurrection: life *after* ‘life after death’

In Colossians 3.1-4: when the Messiah appears, the one who is your life, then you too will appear with him in glory.

Colossians 3:1-4

¹Therefore, if you have been raised with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Keep thinking about things above, not things on the earth, ³for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ (who is your life) appears, then you too will be revealed in glory with him. [NET]

Paul does not say ‘one day you will go to be with him’. No; you already possess life in him. This new life which the Christian possesses secretly, invisible to the world, will burst forth into full bodily reality and visibility.

The clearest and strongest passage is Romans 8.9-11.

- Romans 8: ⁹You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, this person does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is your life because of righteousness. ¹¹Moreover if the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead lives in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will also make your mortal bodies alive through his Spirit who lives in you. [NET]

If the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Jesus the Messiah, dwells in you, says Paul, then the one who raised the Messiah from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies as well, through his Spirit who dwells in you. God will give life, not to a disembodied spirit, not to what many people have thought of as a 'spiritual body' in the sense of a non-physical one, but 'to your mortal bodies also'.

The first letter of John declares that when Jesus appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. The resurrection body of Jesus, which at the moment is almost unimaginable to us in its glory and power, will be the model for our own.

What does Jesus mean when he declares that there are 'many dwelling places' in his father's house? (John 14:1-3) This has regularly been taken, not least when used in the context of bereavement, to mean that the dead (or at least dead Christians) will simply go to 'heaven' permanently, rather than being raised again subsequently to new bodily life. But the word for 'dwelling-places' here, *monai*, is regularly used in ancient Greek not for a final resting place but for a temporary halt on a journey that will take you somewhere else in the long run (think of it as a hotel).

This fits closely with Jesus' words to the dying brigand in Luke: 'Today you will be with me in paradise.' Despite a long tradition of misreading, 'paradise' is here, as in some other Jewish writing, not a final destination, but the blissful garden, the parkland of rest and tranquillity, where the dead are refreshed as they await the dawn of the new day. The main point of the sentence lies in the apparent contrast between the brigand's request and Jesus' reply: 'Remember me,' he says, '*when you come in your kingdom*', implying that this will be at some far distant future. Jesus' answer brings this future hope into the present, implying of course that with his death the kingdom is indeed coming, even though it doesn't look like what anyone had imagined: '*Today* you will be with me in paradise.'

'Resurrection' itself then appears as what the word always meant. It wasn't a way of talking about 'life after death'. It was a way of talking about a new bodily life *after* whatever state of existence one might enter immediately upon death. It was, in other words, life *after* 'life after death'.

3. Resurrection in Corinth

Central in Paul's thoughts we must address the arguments that Paul makes in 2 Cor 4 & 5 and 1 Cor 15. The hope of resurrection underlies the whole of 1 Corinthians, not just chapter 15. But here Paul addresses it head on as of central importance. Some in Corinth have denied the future resurrection, almost certainly on the normal pagan grounds that everyone knew dead people didn't rise again. In reply, Paul speaks, as we saw yesterday, of Jesus as the first fruits, and of the great harvest still to come when all Jesus' people are raised as he has been.

The whole chapter echoes and alludes to Genesis 1-3. It is a theology of new creation, not of the abandonment of creation. The heart of the chapter is an exposition of the two different types of bodies, the present one and the future one.

For Paul, the bodily resurrection does not leave us saying ‘so that’s all right; we shall go, at the last, to join Jesus in a non-bodily, Platonic heaven; but ‘so, then, since the person you are and the world God has made will be gloriously reaffirmed in God’s eventual future, you must be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the Lord’s work, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.’ Belief in the bodily resurrection includes the belief that what is done in the present in the body, by the power of the Spirit, will be reaffirmed in the eventual future, in ways at which we can presently only guess.

4. Resurrection: later debates

There were of course all kinds of debates and further discussions about the bodily resurrection in the second century and beyond. The early fathers at least as far as Origen insisted on this doctrine, though the pressures on them to abandon it must have been very great. Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian—all of them stress bodily resurrection.

With Tertullian in particular, we start to find questions about what precisely bodily resurrection will involve. Suppose a cannibal eats a Christian; and suppose the cannibal is then himself converted. The Christian’s body has become part of the cannibal’s body; who will have which bits at the resurrection?

Tertullian gives a brusque answer. It’s God’s business, he says; he’s the creator, so he can and will sort it out. Origen, faced with similar questions, replies more subtly. Our bodies, he points out, are in any case in a state of flux. It isn’t just that hair and fingernails grow, and are cut off; our entire physical substance is slowly changing.

As we now know, we change our entire physical kit, every atom and molecule, over a period of, at most, every seven years or so. I am physically a totally different person now from the person I was ten years ago. And yet I am still me. Thus it really doesn’t matter whether we get the identical molecules back or not, though some continuity is perfectly possible. The ones we use for a while have been used by other organisms before us, and will be used by others when we are done with them. Dust we are, and to dust we shall return. But God can do new things with dust.

- **The marriage of heaven and earth**

We thus arrive at the last and perhaps the greatest image of new creation, of cosmic renewal, in the whole Bible. This scene, set out in Revelation 21-22, is not well enough known or pondered (perhaps because, in order to earn the right to read it, one should really read the rest of the Revelation of St John first, which proves too daunting for many). This time the image is that of marriage. The new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven like a bride adorned for her husband.

A New Heaven and a New Earth

¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and earth had ceased to exist, and the sea existed no more. ²And I saw the holy city – the new Jerusalem – descending out of heaven from God, made ready like a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: “Look! The residence of God is among human beings. He will live among them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them. ⁴He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death will not exist any more – or mourning, or crying, or pain, for the former things have ceased to exist.” ⁵And the one seated on the throne said: “Look! I am making all things new!” ...

The New Jerusalem Descends

⁹Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven final plagues came and spoke to me, saying, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb!” ¹⁰So he took me away in the Spirit to a huge, majestic mountain and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God. ²²Now I saw no temple in the city, because the Lord God – the All-Powerful – and the Lamb are its temple. ²³The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, because the glory of God lights it up, and its lamp is the Lamb. ²⁴The nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their grandeur into it.

- We notice right away how drastically different this is from all those would-be Christian scenarios in which the end of the story is the Christian going off to heaven as a soul, naked and unadorned, to meet its maker in fear and trembling.
- As in Philippians 3, it is not we who go to heaven; it is heaven that comes to earth; indeed, it is the church itself, the heavenly Jerusalem, that comes down to earth.
- This is the ultimate rejection of all types of Gnosticism, of every worldview that sees the final goal as the separation of the world from God, of the physical from the spiritual, of earth from heaven.
- It is the final answer to the Lord’s Prayer, that God’s kingdom would come and his will be done on earth as in heaven.
- It is what Paul is talking about in Ephesians 1:10, that God’s design and promise was to sum up all things in Christ, things both in heaven and on earth.

- It is the final fulfilment, in richly symbolic imagery, of the promise of Genesis 1, that the creation of male and female would together reflect God's image into the world.
- And it is the final accomplishment of God's great design, to defeat and abolish death for ever—which can only mean the rescue of creation from its present plight of decay.

Heaven and earth, it seems, are not after all poles apart, needing to be separated for ever when all the children of heaven have been rescued from this wicked earth. Nor are they simply different ways of looking at the same thing, as would be implied by some kinds of pantheism. *No*: they are different, radically different; but they are made for each other in the same way (Revelation is suggesting) as male and female. And, when they finally come together, that will be cause for rejoicing in the same way that a wedding is: a creational sign that God's project is going forwards; that opposite poles within creation are made for union, not competition; that love and not hate have the last word in the universe; that fruitfulness and not sterility is God's will for creation.

What is promised in this passage, then, is what Isaiah foresaw: a new heaven and a new earth, replacing the old heaven and the old earth, which were bound to decay. This doesn't mean that God will wipe the slate clean and start again. If that were so, there would be no celebration, no conquest of death, no long preparation now at last complete. As the chapter develops, the Bride, the wife of the Lamb, is described lovingly: she is the new Jerusalem promised by the prophets of the Exile, especially Ezekiel. But, unlike in Ezekiel's vision, where the rebuilt Temple takes eventual centre stage, there is no Temple in this city. The Temple in Jerusalem was always designed, it seems, as a pointer to, and an advance symbol for, the presence of God himself. When the reality is there, the signpost is no longer necessary.

As in Romans and 1 Corinthians, the living God will dwell with and among his people, filling the city with his life and love, and pouring out grace and healing in the river of life that flows from the city out to the nations. There is a sign here of the future project that awaits the redeemed, in God's eventual new world. So far from sitting on clouds playing harps, as people often imagine, the redeemed people of God in the new world will be the agents of his love going out in new ways, to accomplish new creative tasks, to celebrate and extend the glory of his love.

Conclusion

There are of course other passages in the New Testament which speak of new creation, such as Hebrews 11 and 12; 2 Peter; Ephesians 1:15-23 and of course the great poem in Colossians 1.

He is the image of God, the invisible one, the firstborn of all creation.
For in him all things were created, in the heavens and here on the earth.

Things we can see and things we cannot,
—thrones and lordships and rulers and powers—
All were created both through him and for him.

And he is ahead, prior to all else, and in him all things hold together;
And he himself is supreme, the head over the body, the church.

He is the start of it all, firstborn from realms of the dead;
so in all things he might be the chief.

For in him all the Fullness was glad to dwell
and through him to reconcile all to himself,
making peace through the blood of his cross,
through him—yes, things on the earth, and also the things in the heavens.

(Paul for Everyone translation)

SSE13 – Heaven + Hell day 2

Purgatory, paradise & hell



What if you're a really good person, but you get into a really, really bad fight and your leg gets gangrene and it has to be amputated. Will it be waiting for you in heaven?

From the middle ages onwards, most western Christians thought of the church as divided into three parts.

First there was the *church triumphant*, consisting of the saints, the holy souls, who had already arrived at the beatific vision of God. Officially they were still awaiting the final resurrection; but increasingly that wasn't emphasised, and in many medieval portrayals it has dropped out altogether. There was such a place as heaven; some souls had already made it there, and they were therefore to be thought of as 'saints'; they were in the presence of God; what more could they want?

Within this picture, some saints had got there by the direct route, immediately upon death, while others had arrived in 'heaven' after a period elsewhere. But, once there, such saints could act as friends at court for those already on the way. And these triumphant saints had their own celebration: All Saints' Day.

At the other end was the *church militant*. ('Militant' means 'fighting; in the sense of 'fighting the good fight of faith; as in 1 Timothy.) This is, of course, the company of God's people in the present life, about whom we are not presently concerned.

In between was the *church 'expectant'*, that is, 'waiting'; and the place where they were waiting was purgatory.

1. Purgatory

The first thing that we must note is that Purgatory is essentially only a (Roman) Catholic doctrine; it is not held as such in the Eastern Orthodox churches and was rejected on biblical and theological grounds at the Reformation. The main statements of purgatory come from Aquinas in the thirteenth century and Dante in the early fourteenth, but the notion became woven deeply into the entire psyche of the whole period. Huge energy was expended in the late medieval period in developing the picture of purgatory and rearranging present Christian life around it. Most Christians, it was taught, remain sinful in some measure right up to death; they therefore need both punishment and purging, though they can be helped through this time by the prayers, and especially the masses, of the church militant.

Spe Salvi – Encyclical letter of Pope Benedict (30 November 2007)—Paragraphs 44-48

The Pope begins his discussion of Purgatory by looking at the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (cf. *Lk* 16:19-31). He notes ‘that in this parable Jesus is not referring to the final destiny after the Last Judgment, but is taking up [the] notion ... of an intermediate state between death and resurrection, a state in which the final sentence is yet to be pronounced.’ (44) He notes that ‘This early Jewish idea of an intermediate state includes the view that these souls are not simply in a sort of temporary custody but, as the parable of the rich man illustrates, are already being punished or are experiencing a provisional form of bliss. There is also the idea that this state can involve purification and healing which mature the soul for communion with God. The early Church took up these concepts, and in the Western Church they gradually developed into the doctrine of Purgatory. ... With death, our life-choice becomes definitive—our life stands before the judge. Our choice, which in the course of an entire life takes on a certain shape, can have a variety of forms. There can be people who have totally destroyed their desire for truth and readiness to love, people for whom everything has become a lie, people who have lived for hatred and have suppressed all love within themselves. This is a terrifying thought, but alarming profiles of this type can be seen in certain figures of our own history. In such people all would be beyond remedy and the destruction of good would be irrevocable: this is what we mean by the word *Hell*. On the other hand there can be people who are utterly pure, completely permeated by God, and thus fully open to their neighbours—people for whom communion with God even now gives direction to their entire being and whose journey towards God only brings to fulfilment what they already are.’ (45)

Yet we know from experience that neither case is normal in human life. For the great majority of people—we may suppose—there remains in the depths of their being an ultimate interior openness to truth, to love, to God. In the concrete choices of life, however, it is covered over by ever new compromises with evil—much filth covers purity, but the thirst for purity remains and it still constantly re-emerges from all that is base and remains present in the soul. What happens to such individuals when they appear before the Judge? Will all the impurity they have amassed through life suddenly cease to matter? What else might occur? (46)

There is really only one NT text that has been used to support the idea of Purgatory, although most Scripture scholars deny that it should be used to support the doctrine, given that it remains rather obscure.

Saint Paul in 1 Cor 3:12-15 gives us an idea of the differing impact of God’s judgment according to each person’s particular circumstances. Paul begins by saying that Christian life is built upon a common foundation: Jesus Christ. This foundation endures. If we have stood firm on this foundation and built our life upon it, we know that it cannot be taken away from us even in death.

¹²Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of

work each has done. ¹⁴If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. ¹⁵If the work is burned up, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.

In this text, it is in any case evident that our salvation can take different forms, that some of what is built may be burned down, that in order to be saved we personally have to pass through “fire” so as to become fully open to receiving God and able to take our place at the table of the eternal marriage-feast.

Like the great theologian of the 20th Century, Karl Rahner, the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger argued that in this text it is the Lord himself who is the fire of judgement which transforms us as he conforms us to his glorious, resurrected body.

47. Some recent theologians are of the opinion that the fire which both burns and saves is Christ himself, the Judge and Saviour. The encounter with him is the decisive act of judgment. Before his gaze all falsehood melts away. This encounter with him, as it burns us, transforms and frees us, allowing us to become truly ourselves. All that we build during our lives can prove to be mere straw, pure bluster, and it collapses. Yet in the pain of this encounter, when the impurity and sickness of our lives become evident to us, there lies salvation. His gaze, the touch of his heart heals us through an undeniably painful transformation “as through fire”.

But it is a blessed pain, in which the holy power of his love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God. In this way the inter-relation between justice and grace also becomes clear: the way we live our lives is not immaterial, but our defilement does not stain us for ever if we have at least continued to reach out towards Christ, towards truth and towards love. Indeed, it has already been burned away through Christ’s Passion.

At the moment of judgment we experience and we absorb the overwhelming power of his love over all the evil in the world and in ourselves. The pain of love becomes our salvation and our joy. It is clear that we cannot calculate the “duration” of this transforming burning in terms of the chronological measurements of this world. The transforming “moment” of this encounter eludes earthly time-reckoning—it is the heart’s time, it is the time of “passage” to communion with God in the Body of Christ.

In the final paragraph of his encyclical (before the traditional prayer invoking Mary) the Pope speaks of the idea that “one can help the deceased in their intermediate state through prayer” – quoting from 2 Macc 12:38-45.

48. A further point must be mentioned here, because it is important for the practice of Christian hope. Early Jewish thought includes the idea that one can help the deceased in their intermediate state through prayer (see for example 2 Macc 12:38-45; first century BC). The equivalent practice was readily adopted by Christians and is common to the Eastern and Western Church. The East does not

recognise the purifying and expiatory suffering of souls in the afterlife, but it does acknowledge various levels of beatitude and of suffering in the intermediate state. The souls of the departed can, however, receive “solace and refreshment” through the Eucharist, prayer and almsgiving.

The belief that love can reach into the afterlife, that reciprocal giving and receiving is possible, in which our affection for one another continues beyond the limits of death—this has been a fundamental conviction of Christianity throughout the ages and it remains a source of comfort today. Who would not feel the need to convey to their departed loved ones a sign of kindness, a gesture of gratitude or even a request for pardon?

Now a further question arises: if “Purgatory” is simply purification through fire in the encounter with the Lord, Judge and Saviour, how can a third person intervene, even if he or she is particularly close to the other? When we ask such a question, we should recall that no man is an island, entire of itself. Our lives are involved with one another, through innumerable interactions they are linked together. No one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone. The lives of others continually spill over into mine: in what I think, say, do and achieve.

And conversely, my life spills over into that of others: for better and for worse. So my prayer for another is not something extraneous to that person, something external, not even after death. In the interconnectedness of Being, my gratitude to the other—my prayer for him—can play a small part in his purification. And for that there is no need to convert earthly time into God’s time: in the communion of souls simple terrestrial time is superseded.

It is never too late to touch the heart of another, nor is it ever in vain. In this way we further clarify an important element of the Christian concept of hope. Our hope is always essentially also hope for others; only thus is it truly hope for me too. As Christians we should never limit ourselves to asking: how can I save myself? We should also ask: what can I do in order that others may be saved and that for them too the star of hope may rise? Then I will have done my utmost for my own personal salvation as well.



2. Paradise

So all the Christian departed are in substantially the same state — that of restful happiness. Though this is sometimes described as ‘sleep’, we shouldn’t take this to mean that it is a state of unconsciousness.

Had Paul thought that, I very much doubt that he would have described life immediately after death as ‘being with Christ, which is far better’. Rather, ‘sleep’ here means that the *body* is ‘asleep’ in the sense of ‘dead’, while the real person—however we want to describe him or her—continues.

This state is not, clearly, the final destiny for which the Christian dead are bound, which is as we have seen the bodily resurrection. But it is a state in which the dead are held firmly within the conscious love of God and the conscious presence of Jesus Christ, while they await that day.

Since both the departed saints and we ourselves are in Christ, we share with them in the ‘Communion of Saints’. They are still our brothers and sisters in Christ. When we celebrate the eucharist they are there with us, along with the angels and archangels. Why then should we not pray for and with them? Even if we are never sure that someone we love who has died has been purified, we can always pray that they will be refreshed and filled with God’s joy and peace.

{The intercession of the saints?} In the New Testament it is clear: because of Christ and the Spirit, every single Christian is welcome at any time to come before the father himself. If you have a royal welcome awaiting you in the throne room, for whatever may be on your heart and mind, whether great or small, why would you bother hanging around the outer lobby trying to persuade someone there, however distinguished, to go in and ask for you? To question this, even by implication, is to challenge one of the central blessings and privileges of the gospel.

The important thing is that we grasp the central hope of the ultimate resurrection, set within the new creation itself, and that we reorder all our thinking and speaking about every other ‘after-death’ question in that light.

3. Beyond hope, beyond pity (hell)

What about 'hell'? Part of the difficulty of the topic, as with the others we have been studying, is that the word 'hell' itself conjures up an image gained more from medieval imagery than from the earliest Christian writings. Just as many who were brought up to think of God as a bearded old gentleman sitting on a cloud decided that, when they stopped believing in such a being, they had therefore 'stopped believing in God', so many who were taught to think of hell as a literal underground location full of worms and fire, or for that matter as a kind of torture chamber at the centre of God's castle of heavenly delights, decided that, when they stopped believing in that, so they stopped believing in hell.

The most common New Testament word sometimes translated as 'hell' is *Gehenna*. *Gehenna* was a place, not just an idea: it was the rubbish heap outside the south-west corner of the old city of Jerusalem. The point is that when Jesus was warning his hearers about *Gehenna* he was not, as a general rule, telling them that unless they repented in this life they would burn in the next one. As with God's kingdom, so with its opposite: it is *on earth* that things matter, not somewhere else.

It is therefore only by extension, and with difficulty, that we can extrapolate from the many gospel sayings which articulate this urgent, immediate warning to the deeper question of a warning about what may happen after death itself. The two parables which appear to address this question directly are, we should remember, *parables*, not actual descriptions of the afterlife. They use stock ancient Jewish imagery, such as 'Abraham's bosom', not to teach about what happens after death but to insist on justice and mercy within the present life. This is not to say that Jesus would have dissented from their implied picture of post-mortem realities. It is, rather, to point out that to take the scene of Abraham, the Rich Man and Lazarus 'literally' is about as sensible as trying to find out the name of the Prodigal Son. Jesus simply didn't say very much about the future life; he was, after all, primarily concerned to announce that God's kingdom was coming 'on earth as in heaven'. He was not concerned to give any fresh instruction on post-mortem judgment, apart from the strange hints that it was going to be dramatically and horribly anticipated in one particular way, in space-time history, within a generation.

Of course this does not stop the double dogmatism of either the person who knows exactly who is and who isn't 'going to hell', or that of the universalist who is absolutely certain that there is no such place, or that if there is it will, at the last, be empty. But then, faced with the Balkans, Rwanda, the Middle East, Darfur and all kinds of other horrors which enlightened western thought can neither explain nor alleviate, opinion has come to see that there must be such a thing as judgment. Judgment—the sovereign declaration that *this* is good and to be upheld and vindicated, and *that* is evil and to be condemned—is the only alternative to chaos.

God is utterly committed to set the world right in the end. This doctrine, like that of resurrection itself, is held firmly in place by the belief in God as creator on the one side and the belief in his goodness on the other. And that setting-right must necessarily involve the elimination of all that distorts God's good and lovely creation, and in particular of all that defaces his image-bearing human creatures. Not to put too fine a point upon it, there will be no barbed wire in the kingdom of God. And those whose whole being has become dependent upon barbed wire will have no place there either.

For 'barbed wire', of course, read whichever catalogue of awfulnesses you prefer: genocide, nuclear bombs, child prostitution, the arrogance of empire, the commodification of souls, the idolisation of race. The New Testament has several such categories, functioning as red flashing lights to warn against going down a road that leads straight to a fenceless cliff.

The traditional view is that those who spurn God's salvation, who refuse to turn from idolatry and wickedness, are held for ever in conscious torment. Sometimes this is sharpened up by over-enthusiastic preachers and teachers, who claim to know precisely which sorts of behaviour are bound to lead to hell and which, though reprehensible, are still forgivable. But the traditional picture is clear: such human beings will continue to be, in some sense, human beings, and they will be punished in an endless time.

The greatest objection to the traditional view in recent times – and the last two hundred years have seen a massive swing towards universalism in the western churches, at least the so-called 'mainstream' ones – has come from the deep revulsion many have felt at the idea of the torture-chamber in the middle of the castle of delights, the concentration camp in the middle of the beautiful countryside, the idea that, among the joys of the blessed, we should include the contemplation of the torments of the wicked. However much we tell ourselves that God must condemn evil if he is a good God, and that those who love God must endorse that condemnation, as soon as these pictures present themselves to our minds we turn away in disgust.

A different possibility does justice both to the key texts and to the realities of human life of which, after a century of horror mostly dreamed up by human beings, we are now all too well aware. When human beings give their heartfelt allegiance and worship to that which is not God, they progressively cease to reflect the image of God. One of the primary laws of human life is that **you become like what you worship**; what's more, you *reflect* what you worship, not only back to the object itself but outwards to the world around. Those who worship money increasingly define themselves in terms of it, and increasingly treat other people as creditors, debtors, partners or customers rather than as human beings. Those who worship sex define themselves in terms of it (their preferences, their practices, their past histories), and increasingly treat other people as actual or potential sexual objects. Those who worship power define themselves in terms of it, and treat other people as either collaborators, competitors or pawns. These and many other forms of idolatry combine in a thousand ways, all of them damaging to the image-bearing quality of the people concerned and of those whose lives they touch.

My suggestion is that it is possible for human beings so to continue down this road, so to refuse all whisperings of good news, all glimmers of the true light, all promptings to turn and go the other way, all signposts to the love of God, that after death they become at last, by their own effective choice, *beings that once were human but now are not*, creatures that have ceased to bear the divine image at all.

With the death of that body in which they inhabited God's good world, in which the flickering flame of goodness had not been completely snuffed out, they pass simultaneously not only beyond hope but also beyond pity. There is no concentration camp in the beautiful countryside, no torture chamber in the palace of delight. Those creatures that still exist in an ex-human state, no longer reflecting their maker in any meaningful sense, can no longer excite, in themselves or others, the natural sympathy some feel even for the hardened criminal.

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The most important thing to say, is that 'heaven and hell' are not what the whole game is about. This is one of the central 'surprises' in the Christian hope. The whole point is that the question of 'what happens to me after death' *is not* the major, central, framing question that centuries of theological tradition have supposed. The New Testament, true to its Old Testament roots, regularly insists that the major, central, framing question is that of God's purpose of rescue and recreation for the whole world, the entire cosmos. The destiny of individual human beings must be understood within that context – not simply in the sense that we are only part of a much larger picture, but in the sense that part of the whole point of being 'saved' in the present is so that we can play a vital role within that larger picture and purpose. And that in turn makes us realise that the question of our own 'destiny', in terms of the alternatives of joy or woe, is probably the wrong way of looking at the whole question.

The question ought to be, '*How will God's new creation come?*' and then, '*How will we humans contribute to that renewal of creation, and to the fresh projects which the creator God will launch in his new world?*'

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Questions?

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Rethinking resurrection today: who, where, what, why, when and how

- **Who will be raised from the dead?**

All people, according to John; for Paul there is a special sense of resurrection which clearly applies to those who are in Christ and indwelt by the Spirit.

- **Where will the resurrection take place?**

On the new earth, joined as it will then be to the new heaven. In this new world there will be no problem of overcrowding. Apart from the question of whether every human will be raised or only some, we need to remind ourselves that roughly half the humans who have ever lived are alive at the moment. World population has grown at an enormous rate in the last century; we easily forget that for much of history huge tracts of land have been hardly inhabited at all. Even the civilized and somewhat crowded cities of biblical times were mostly, by today's standards, like small market towns. In any case, if we take seriously the promise of new heavens and new earth, none of this is a problem. God is the creator, and his new world will be exactly what we need and want, with the love and beauty of this present world taken up and transformed.

- **More fully, then, what precisely will the resurrection body be?**

C. S. Lewis, particularly in his remarkable book *The Great Divorce*, manages to get us to envisage bodies that are more solid, more real, more substantial than our present ones. That is the task that 2 Corinthians invites us to. These will be bodies of which the phrase 'the weight of glory', taken from that letter (4.17), will be seen, felt and known to be appropriate.

Further questions were asked in the ancient world at this point, and often re-emerge in contemporary discussion. Which of our present characteristics, and indeed present blemishes, will be retained in the transformed physicality? If I don't like the shape of my nose, will I have to put up with it in a future life as well? There is no way we can answer such questions. All we can surmise from the picture of Jesus' resurrection is that, just as his wounds were still visible, not now as sources of pain and death but as signs of his victory, so the Christian's risen body will bear such marks of his or her loyalty to God's particular calling as are appropriate, not least where that has involved suffering. Cate Blanchett recently remarked on the obsession that many in Hollywood have for 'nips and tucks' – she opposed all of this, saying that she was proud of her small blemishes as 'signs of life.'

In particular, this new body will be immortal. That is, it will have passed *beyond* death, not just in the *temporal* sense but in the *ontological* sense of no longer being subject to sickness, injury, decay and death itself. None of these destructive forces will have any power over the new body. That, indeed, may be one of the ways of understanding the *strangeness* of the risen body of Jesus. The disciples were looking at the first, and so far the only, piece of incorruptible physicality.

At this point we must notice that, once again, our language gets us into trouble. The word ‘immortality’ has often been used to mean ‘*disembodied* immortality,’ and it has sometimes then been used in a sharp contrast with ‘resurrection’. As a result, we easily forget Paul’s point about the resurrection body. It will be a body; but it will not be subject to mortality. An ‘immortal body’ is something most people find so strange that they don’t even pause to wonder if that’s what Paul and the other early Christians were talking about. But it is.

There is a world of difference between this belief and a belief in an ‘immortal soul’. Platonists believe that all humans have an immortal element within them, normally referred to as ‘soul’. In the New Testament, however, ‘immortality’ is something which only God possesses by nature, and which he then shares, as a gift of grace rather than an innate possession, with his people.

- **Why will we be given new bodies?**

According to the early Christians, the purpose of this new body will be to rule wisely over God’s new world. Forget those images about lounging around playing harps. There will be work to do and we shall relish doing it. All the skills and talents which we have put to God’s service in this present life—and perhaps, too, the interests and likings we gave up because they conflicted with our vocation—will be enhanced and ennobled and given back to us to be exercised to his glory. This is perhaps the most mysterious, and least explored, aspect of the resurrection life. But there are several promises in the New Testament about God’s people ‘reigning’, and these cannot just be empty words. If, as we have already seen, the biblical view of God’s future is of the renewal of the entire cosmos, there will be plenty to be done, entire new projects to undertake. In terms of the vision of original creation in Genesis 1 and 2, the garden will need to be tended once more, and the animals renamed. These are only images, of course, but like all other future-oriented language they serve as true signposts to a larger reality—a reality to which most Christians give little or no thought.

- **When will the resurrection happen?**

Some have supposed that we go, immediately upon death, into the resurrection state. No. Paul says that, if Christ is the first fruits, those who belong to him will be raised ‘at his coming’—which clearly hasn’t happened yet. The book of Revelation speaks, as do many Jewish writings of the period, of the dead waiting patiently, and sometimes not so patiently, for the time when they will finally be raised to new life. This intermediate state, in fact, is more or less a constant feature of resurrection belief both Jewish and Christian.

- **How will it happen?**

What we are talking about is a great act of *new creation*. John Polkinghorne offers a metaphor which may help: God will download our software onto his hardware, until the time when he gives us new hardware to run the software again. Paul says that God will give us new bodies; there may well be some bodily continuity, as with Jesus himself, but God is well capable of recreating people even if their ashes are scattered into a fast-flowing river.

Whenever the question of ‘how’ is raised in the early Christian writings, the answer comes back: by the Spirit. The Spirit who brooded over the waters of chaos, the Spirit who indwelt Jesus so richly that it became known as the Spirit of Jesus: this Spirit, already present within Jesus’ followers as the first fruits, the down payment, the guarantee of what is to come, is not only the beginning of the future life, even in the present time, but also the energizing power through which the final transformation will take place. The early creed spoke of ‘the Holy Spirit, the Lord *and giver of life*’. That is exactly true to the New Testament.

Building for the kingdom of God

We are not about trying to build the kingdom by our own efforts.

(1) God builds God's kingdom. God has ordered the world in such a way this his own work in the world will take place through the human beings who reflect his image. God's intention in creation, is that his wise, creative, loving presence and power will be reflected & 'imaged' into the world *through* us – his human creatures. We have been enlisted to be his stewards in the ongoing project of creation.

Key Scriptures: Gen 1:26-30; Exod 19:3-6

(2) We also need to distinguish between the final kingdom and the present anticipations of it. The vision in Rev 21-22 of the final coming together of heaven and earth is God's supreme act of new creation. The only real prototype for this (other than the first creation itself) was the resurrection of Jesus. Only God will sum up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth. He alone will make the 'new heavens and the new earth.'

But what we can and indeed must do in the present – if we are obedient to the gospel, if we are following Jesus and if we are indwelt, energised and directed by the Spirit – is to build *for* the kingdom. Remember 1 Cor 15:58 – 'what you do in the Lord *is not in vain*.' In building for the kingdom, we are not oiling the wheels of a machine that is about to plummet over the edge of a cliff; we are not restoring a great painting that is just about to be thrown into a great fire; we are not planting and pruning roses in a garden that is about to be dug up for the new Sydney Metro (this week's version!)

No – we are accomplishing something which will become part of God's new world. Every act of love, gratitude and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely handicapped child to read or walk; every act of care or nurture, of comfort and support for either other human beings or indeed any creature whatsoever; every prayer and every Spirit-led teaching; any deed that proclaims the gospel, builds up the church, embraces holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus more honoured in the world – all of this will find its way, through the resurrection power of God, into the new world and the new creation which God will one day make.

With the resurrection of Jesus, God's new creation, or the recreation of his wonderful world has begun and continues mysteriously as we (as God's people) live in the risen Jesus in the power of the Spirit. Anything that we do in Christ by the power of the Spirit is never wasted. All of it will find its proper place in the new creation – indeed it will be enhanced there.

This is not to say that we have an absolutely clear idea of what all this will mean in practice. These are more signposts than photographs. We don't know what musical instruments we will have to play our worship music in God's new world – but there will be Bach and Mozart and Emmanuel Worship and perhaps even Hillsong!

I don't know how the trees I plant today will be related to the wonderful trees that will be in God's recreated world, but I do know that the proper response to being told that the kingdom was coming tomorrow would be to go out and plant a tree. I don't know how the painting that an artist creates today in prayer and wisdom will find a place in God's new world; I am not sure how our work for justice for the poor, for peace in the middle east and for the forgiveness of global and third-world debts will reappear in the new world.

But I do know that God's new world of justice and joy, of grace and peace and hope for the whole earth was launched when Jesus came out of the tomb on Easter morning. I know that Jesus calls his followers to live in him by the power of his Spirit so that we can be new-creation people right here and right now, bringing the signs and symbols of his kingdom to birth on earth – as in heaven.

The resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the holy Spirit mean that we are called to bring real and effective signs of God's renewed creation to birth in the very midst of the present world and present age. Not to do this, is ultimately to collude with the forces of sin and death. But as people of hope, we should never focus on the negative, but always on the positive – the calling, in the present, to share in the hope of God's whole new creation.

Bishop Tom Wright uses a great image of a stonemason working on one small part of a great Cathedral. The architect already has the whole project in mind, the plans are drawn, and the instructions have been passed onto the members of the teams of masons, detailing which stones need to be carved in which ways. The foreman of each team distributes the tasks among the members of the team. One will be shaping stones for this particular tower, turret or wall; another will be carving the delicate pattern that will break up the otherwise forbidding walls; another still will be working on carving one of the gargoyles or the coat of arms; other teams will be creating and carving the statues of the saints, martyrs and kings and queens. Each stonemason and each team will be vaguely aware of what each other person is doing, and they will also have some awareness that there will be whole swathes of other tradespeople busily engaged in the project as well. When they have finished with their individual stones, they will hand them over, with perhaps no more than a vague awareness of exactly where in the completed project their particular work will find its home. They may never have seen the complete plans for the building identifying exactly where their stones will be used. Indeed they may not even live to see the end of the project – some of the great Cathedrals in Europe have been built over the course of decades and even over hundreds of years. They are not, as such, building the cathedral themselves; but they are building *for* the cathedral. Once the whole building is complete, their work will mean so much more as part of the whole than the individual stone or gargoyle ever meant while it was being carefully shaped and carved in the stonemason's yard.

The image is imperfect – because the building will eventually be complete as a result of all of the individual artisans and craftspeople working together. God’s eventual kingdom will be a fresh gift of transformation and renewal from the divine architect himself.

But the image does help us to see that there will be continuity and discontinuity between what we presently work for in this life, and the ultimate future life in which God will gather all things together and transform them, ‘making all things new’ in Christ. Nothing that we do in the Lord is ever in vain. This is the mandate that we have been given to continue to work and act for justice and mercy, for ecological renewal, and to more fully reflect God’s wise stewardship into his creation.

There is a wonderful scriptural image of this in the Gospel of John. He begins his gospel of course with, ‘In the beginning was the word...’ providing a direct echo of creation, and reminding us that in Jesus there is new creation beginning. Then, in the story of the passion and death of Jesus, we have Pilate declaring before the crowd – behold the man. This happens of course, on Good Friday – in Jewish reckoning the sixth day of the week, the same day when God created human beings. Jesus is exalted on the cross – raised up for all to see the splendour of God’s creation (naked without shame).

On the seventh day, the Sabbath, Jesus lies dead in the tomb – in a Sabbath rest.

Then on the first day of the week (which John is keen to remind us twice – in John 20:1 and 20:19) – or the eighth day – Mary goes to the tomb while it is still dark and sees the stone rolled away and the empty tomb. She runs to the disciples, and Peter and John come running and see the burials cloths with the cloth that covered his head lying separately. John sees and believes and both return home. But Mary stays there, weeping. She sees Jesus, and in the midst of the garden, supposes this man to be the gardener. Nothing ever happens in John’s gospel by accident. This new garden takes us back to the first garden – and reminds us that the resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of new creation – the continuation of God’s original plan of creation.

God’s plan is for creation to be redeemed – that is, space is to be redeemed, time is to be redeemed, and matter is to be redeemed. God said ‘very good’ over his space-time-and-matter creation. Although the redemption of this world from its present corruption and decay will mean transformations we cannot even begin to imagine, the one thing we can be absolutely certain of is that God is not going to say of the present creation: “oh well, it was a nice try and good while it lasted but clearly the whole thing has gone belly-up and a bit smelly, so we might as well drop it all and go for something else entirely, like a non-material, non-spatio-temporal world instead.”

If God’s plan is not to reject his created world, but to *redeem* his created world of space, time and matter, we are left with a question – what might this look like? What would it be like to celebrate this redemption, this healing and transformation now, in the present, and thereby to anticipate God’s final intention and plan?

Justice

The clear intention of God, expressed right across the biblical witness, from Genesis to Revelation, is to set the world right. We call this *justice*. This plan was gloriously fulfilled in Jesus, supremely in his resurrection, and must now (continue to) be implemented in the world. It is because Jesus rose from the dead, and God's new world has already broken in to the present, that Christian work for justice in the present – such as the ongoing campaign for debt remission and ecological responsibility – take the shape that they do. If we think that the body of Jesus may still have actually been left in the tomb, then we are robbed of all the energy that we need for our work to bring real, bodily, concrete signs of hope to the present world. When God says in Exod 3:6 that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the God of the living – it is to underline what he will say a few verses later: that he has heard the cry of his people in slavery, and he is coming to rescue them and to bring them to their promised land.

⁶He added, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Then Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God. ⁷The Lord said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt. I have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrows. ⁸I have come down to deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up from that land to a land that is both good and spacious, to a land flowing with milk and honey..." (Exodus 3:6-8)

In first century Palestine, the doctrine of the resurrection was *revolutionary*: it spoke of God's desire to bring about the new Exodus, the real return from exile and the great liberation from slavery and oppression. The Sadducees opposed this because it was a threat to their own position, because they were the powerful elite who were comfortable with the domination of the Roman empire because they enjoyed their status, wealth and position in society. Belief in the resurrection meant belief that God wanted to turn the world upside down. As Mary says in the Magnificat, God will pull down the mighty from their thrones and exalt the humble and the meek. Belief in the resurrection doesn't lead to suicide bombers – because they are people who are wanting to escape from this present world and escape into some glorious future (with lots of virgins – but what one does with a virgin when one doesn't have a body remains unexplained). Rather, people who believe in the resurrection, in God making a new world where everything will be set right at last, are unstoppably motivated to work for that new world in the present.

Belief in what God has already done through the resurrection of Jesus can be seen in the work and mission of the early church. The first disciples knew that the world had already been turned upside down, and that Jesus had been installed as the only proper Lord of the whole world. It is not a matter of waiting until God does something eventually – God has already brought this future, where the world will be put to rights, into the present in the person of Jesus.

That is what we pray every time we pray the Lord's prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." This is also why this prayer goes on to pray for bread

each day and for our forgiveness of one another.

In terms of justice, the major issue that we face today, and equivalent to the massive injustice of slavery that existed 200 years ago (even if there are currently more slaves in the world now, then there have ever been {including more than 10 million sex slaves, 126 million child labourers, 12.3 million bonded labourers}) – is the question of the massive economic imbalance that continues to exist (and the ‘global economic meltdown’ has done nothing to address it). The major symptom of this is the continuing massive third-world debt which remains ridiculously unpayable. While some may think this issue is boring and irrelevant, we must continue to work and fight to condemn this global injustice – or stand condemned by future generations, and stand alongside people who stood by and did nothing to abolish slavery 200 years ago or the Nazis 70 years ago. Watch the movie *Amazing Grace* or read the story of William Wilberforce (1759-1833) and note the constant echoes of arguments that many continue to use today to defend the status quo. (It is too complicated; its just the way the world is and works, etc.) The only way to describe the world we live in is that the rich are stealing from the poor; the strong from the weak.

Beauty

Taking creation and new creation seriously is the best way to revitalise creativity among Christians today.

The beauty of the present world has something about it of the beauty of a chalice: beautiful in itself but more hauntingly beautiful for what it contains; or the beauty of a violin – again beautiful in itself but especially beautiful because we know the music that it is capable of. Another example is an engagement ring – something that is meant to delight the eye but also, and more so, to delight the heart because of what it promises. So the beauty of creation to which art responds and attempts to express, imitate and highlight is not simply the beauty that it contains within itself, but the beauty which it possesses in the light of what it is promised to be.

Part of being made in God’s image is that we are ourselves creators and procreators. We have this extraordinary ability to bring forth new life – not only in the unsurpassable gift of begetting children but in a thousand other ways as well. This is central to the mandate that the human race received in Genesis 1 and 2. All of this is part of our call to be stewards of creation. All genuine art is a response to the beauty of creation, which itself is a pointer to the beauty of God.

Omnia ens est unum, bonum, verum et pulchrum.

All being is one, good, true and beautiful (the four transcendentals).

Now the church does not have a monopoly on things that are kitsch or merely sentimental, but if you want to find examples easily, it is a great place to start! There is a great opportunity for Christians with an integrated worldview of both creation and new creation to find a way forward. We read in Romans 8 about Paul affirming that the whole of creation is groaning in travail as it longs for and awaits redemption: creation is good, but it is not God.

We are able, then, to describe the whole world as one, good, true and beautiful not just because of what it is now, but because of what it will one day be – by the grace of God alone!

When Jesus rose from the dead, as the first-fruit, example and generating power of the new creation, the marks of the nails were still visible on his hands and his feet; the wound of the spear was still present in his side. It was in the wounds that Jesus was able to be identified. We will know that we are on our way to a fresh mission in the Church when our art is able to come to terms with *both* the wounds of the world *and* the promise of the resurrection. Then we might begin to have a foretaste of the way the world will be, ‘when the earth is filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.’ (Isaiah 11:9)

Evangelisation

In the centre of the work of new creation, in striving to bring into being in the present signs of God’s new world, there is the personal call of the gospel of Jesus to every child, woman and man. Many of us have witnessed first-hand very terrible and almost harrowing examples of what is often called ‘evangelism’ or ‘evangelisation’. Some people conclude that because so many people do it so badly that none of us should do it at all.

Some of the things that have gone under the heading of evangelisation consists in taking the traditional framework of the expectation of heaven-or-hell and persuading people that they must make a choice now to consider the ‘heaven’ option and grab it while they still have the chance. The problem that we all face, that prevents us from ‘going to heaven when we die’ is of course ‘sin’, but the solution is given in accepting Jesus Christ ‘as personal Lord and saviour.’ There is nothing specifically wrong with this, even if it only gives a very small and undernourished part of the story.

What we discover is that it is not so much the quality of our preaching and teaching that matters, but the faithfulness of God. God is always communicated more by prayer and faithfulness than by techniques and attempted cleverness.

If we want to ‘proclaim the gospel’ in a more full and complete way we need to start by clearly understanding that ‘the gospel’ in the NT is the good news that Jesus, whom this God raised from the dead, is the world’s true Lord (and King). When some people hear the word ‘god’ they will think of an old man with a white beard, whilst others will only think of some kind of heavenly gas. Some will have a fairly good idea of the historical person of Jesus, but many others will be equally hazy.

The power of the gospel is not in the offer of a new spirituality or religious experience, nor in the threat of hellfire, which can be removed if you tick this box, raise your hand, go forward for prayer, sign this card or whatever... but it is in the powerful announcement that God is God, that Jesus is Lord, that all powers of evil have been defeated, and that God’s new world has already begun. This also means that every person everywhere is invited to come in, to join the party, discover forgiveness for the past, discover an amazing destiny in God’s future, and a vocation in the present.

You might think this all sounds well-and-good, except that so often the church does not actually seem like much of a party and much of what I have just said seems at least a little laughable. But there are hints and signs of new creation around us – in the massive attempts within the church community to embody justice, to work for better education, health, aged care, protection of all life (from natural conception to natural death), feeding the poor and the hungry, caring for the sick and the needy, working to eradicate poverty, creating works of art and beauty... all of these are already signs of new creation.

Of course being a Christian means more than ticking a box. Following Jesus means just that – *following* him. To confess that Jesus is Lord and to believe that God raised him from the dead is to allow one’s whole life to be reshaped by him, knowing that although this will be at times extremely painful and uncomfortable, this will lead to a genuine and fulfilled human life in the present and a complete, glorified and resurrected human life in the future.

This is the foundation for a deep and true hope for the day-to-day life of the Church and of each one of us. There is a new world, and it has already begun, and it works by healing and forgiveness and new starts and fresh energy. It comes about as people worship the God in whose image we are made, as we follow the Lord who bore our sins on the cross and rose from the dead, as we are indwelt by his Spirit and are thereby given a new way of life and a new zest for life. This new world of the new creation is constantly surprising, constantly full of hope, constantly coming to us from God’s future to shape us into the people through whom God can carry out his work in our world.

Amen!