

## Resurrection and the Renewal of Creation. Public lecture, autumn 2018

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**ABSTRACT:** The notion of resurrection has been strangely absent from much popular, as well as academic, Christian thinking in the west. For most, ‘going to heaven’ is the ultimate aim, rather than the biblical ‘new heavens and new earth’, promises rooted in the vision of God as good creator and wise judge. Paul and John expound a vision of new creation, starting with Jesus’ own resurrection. The church’s mission is to model and implement this new creation in the present, not least in working for justice and beauty, ahead of the final renewal which remains God’s own work.

**KEYWORDS:** resurrection, new creation, new heavens and earth, heaven, funerals, Easter, mission

I attended a funeral not long ago which set me thinking about whether the western church has really got it right. The funeral was for a bright young man with a lovely family, cruelly struck down with cancer in his mid-30s. It was a wonderful service in many ways. There was vibrant singing, wise and consoling teaching, and not least a brave, funny and poignant tribute from the young widow herself. There were hundreds of people there, from many different walks of life, all of whom had been touched by the remarkable young man whose death we were mourning. It was, in all sorts of ways, a deeply Christian funeral.

But there was one note missing: resurrection. The word ‘resurrection’ itself came in the liturgy right at the start, when the minister recited Jesus’ saying in John 11: ‘I am the resurrection and the life’. That was repeated near the end, with no explanation. That was it.

But the whole of the rest of the service could have been summarized in the following passage from a well known first-century writer:

All of us are sojourners here and strangers and exiles. The soul is an exile and a wanderer, [which] has left Heaven ... for earth and life on earth, as on an island, buffeted by the seas, imprisoned within the body like an oyster in its shell.

The writer in question goes on to speak of Socrates and others who, were happy to depart this life for a blissful heaven. Many of the hymns, prayers and readings in the funeral expressed something like this: our late friend had ‘gone home at last’. He was ‘having a party with Jesus’ in his true heavenly abode. Nobody seemed to notice that they were expressing, not first-century Christian faith, but first-century Platonism. That quotation came from one of the great philosophers and essayists of the late first century: Plutarch, a pagan priest at the shrine at Delphi, a much-travelled and widely-read man of letters.<sup>1</sup> It is astonishing to me that so many in today’s western church would recognise his views as their own, *without realising just how different they are from what the early Christians believed.*<sup>2</sup>

You see the same problem from another angle if you consider the way Christians celebrate, and talk about, Easter Day. We in the western churches, again, are good at commemorating Lent; we know how to keep Palm Sunday; we go into Holy Week and journey with Jesus through Maundy Thursday and all the way to the cross on Good Friday itself. We then have glorious Easter Morning celebrations – but that’s about it; and many of the sermons you will hear that day are not in fact about ‘resurrection’ as such, but about our hope of going to heaven to be with Jesus. We do not keep a forty-day feast to correspond to the forty-day fast of Lent. I think we should. Easter Day is not simply the ‘happy ending’ after the sad and dark story of Holy Week. Easter is the *start* of something, not the ending. It is the beginning of the new creation which has been made possible by the overcoming of the forces of corruption and decay in the death of Jesus.

We have thus, in effect, fitted Jesus – and even his resurrection! – into the story our western churches have had all along, of the present world as the preparation for the double or perhaps triple options for ‘life after death’ – for heaven or hell, in the traditional scheme, and for purgatory in the case of traditional Catholic teaching. (I note that some recent great Catholic theologians, such as Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, have radically modified ‘purgatory’ now, but that is a question for another time.<sup>3</sup>) My point is that in the New Testament we find

<sup>1</sup> Plutarch, „On Exile“ 607D”, Plutarch, *Moralia*, (transl. P.H. de Lacy – B. Einarsen) (Loeb Classical Library 405; (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1959) VII, 569-571).

<sup>2</sup> This article, an edited version of the lecture originally given at the conference in November 2018, draws on the fuller exposition of several points in my two books, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK – Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 2003) and *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK – San Francisco: HarperOne 2007). The first of these in particular discusses many important passages and themes for which there was no space in the present brief treatment, including e.g. Jesus’ discussion with the Sadducees in Matthew 22.23-33 and parallels, a point that was raised in the discussion after this piece was given at the conference in November 2018.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. K. Rahner, *On the Theology of Death* (New York: Herder & Herder 1961); J. Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press 1988). I have summarized the relevant points in Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 178-179, 324.

a very different picture. We do not find a ‘life after death’ in heaven, but a ‘life after “life after death”’, a newly embodied life in a newly reconstituted creation. And we see Jesus’ resurrection, not as the ‘happy ending’ after the crucifixion – though to be sure it functions like that at a fairly trivial level – but as the launching of nothing less than new creation itself. What I want to do in this article, building on some of my earlier works and tracking with a theme from my recent Gifford Lectures in Aberdeen, is to trace out how that works, and apply it to some aspects of our present life and the challenges that now face us in our confused and dangerous world.<sup>4</sup> I make no apology for repeating, and then building on, some things I have said in earlier books, such as *Surprised by Hope*. It is clear to me that even among those who have understood what I’ve been saying intellectually there is still often a gap with actual practice.

## 1. Resurrection in the First Century

The Greek word for ‘resurrection’ is *anastasis*, literally ‘a standing-up’. And here’s the key point: in the world of the first century, *anastasis* never referred to what we think of as ‘life after death’. Or, to put it the other way round, when people talked (as they often did) about ‘life after death’ or ‘what will happen to us when we die’, they never used the word *anastasis*. Resurrection was not something that happened *immediately* after you died. Even in Jesus’ case, there was a short period of being dead, which was then *followed by* Easter Day and the new bodily life. And the whole New Testament, and all the great Christian teachers through for centuries after that, taught the same thing: that what God did for Jesus at Easter Day he will do for all his people at the end, raising them to new bodily life to share in the life of the new world. As the gospel moved away from its Jewish roots and into the Greek world of people like Plutarch, this was harder and harder to cling on to, but most of them did.

It is striking, in fact, that the New Testament isn’t particularly interested in what happens to people after they die. There are a few hints. Jesus tells the brigand on the next cross that he will be ‘with him in Paradise’ – and Paradise is a temporary blissful dwelling while you await resurrection, not a final destination.<sup>5</sup> For Jesus, the destination came three days later; the brigand, like all others it seems, is still waiting. (Just to make that clear: Paul, in 1 Corinthians, says that the Messiah rises as the ‘firstfruits’, and then *at his coming*, his ‘parousia’, those

<sup>4</sup> N.T. Wright, *History and Eschatology: Jesus and the Promise of Natural Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press 2019). Chapter 6 is particularly relevant.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 23.43.

who belong to him will rise as he had risen. Paul makes no mention of any others who already share the risen life; that will come later.<sup>6</sup>) Jesus tells the disciples in the Upper Room that he is going to prepare a place for them and will then return to take them to himself.<sup>7</sup> But this is the same Jesus who a few chapters earlier had said that on the last day the dead will hear the voice of the Son of Man and will be raised to new life. The two fit together. Jesus will take his people to be with him for the moment; then, when the time comes, he will give them new bodily life in his new world. And we note that when the early Christians refer to people who have already died but have not been raised, only the book of Revelation speaks of them as ‘souls’, and it’s clear that it is not meaning that in a Platonic sense.<sup>8</sup> The early Christian view is that we humans are whole creatures, body included, and that after death we are in that sense ‘naked’, awaiting further ‘clothing’ in the resurrection.<sup>9</sup> We are not heading off as a disembodied soul to a non-spatio-temporal heaven. In that interim period the Holy Spirit who has indwelt Christians will continue to hold their real self in the close presence of Jesus until the Spirit then gives new life to their physical bodies.

All this is rooted in the view of resurrection held by many Jews (though not all) in the period. Ever since the Book of Daniel, and then the book we call Second Maccabees, the hints and guesses from earlier texts had become explicit, under two constraints. These are vital if we are to understand why resurrection matters and what it means for us today.

The two constraints, deep within Israel’s scripture and agonized over in the second-temple period of Jewish life, are *the goodness of creation* on the one hand and *God’s commitment to justice* on the other. You see this in the stories of the Maccabean martyrs from the 160s BC.<sup>10</sup> As they are being tortured to death by the pagan king for their refusal to compromise their ancestral way of life, they say, again and again, that they worship and serve the God who made heaven and earth, the creator of all. They are not worshipping a local or tribal God, or one who doesn’t care about the way the world is. They belong to the one who made it all in the first place. And along with creation goes justice. As the Psalms and prophets insist, Israel’s God cares passionately about putting right that which is wrong in the world. We in the west have often reduced this to the negative word ‘judgment’, seeing that largely in terms of punishment for misdeeds. But in the Hebrew Scriptures – for instance, in Psalms like 96 and 98, but in many other places too – ‘judgment’ is a joyous thing, a cause for celebration, because it means that Israel’s God is coming to sort everything out at last. He is coming to

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<sup>6</sup> See 1 Corinthians 15.23.

<sup>7</sup> John 14.1-4.

<sup>8</sup> Revelation 6.9; 20.4.

<sup>9</sup> 2 Corinthians 5.1-5.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Maccabees 7: see Wright, *The Resurrection*, 150-153.

put things right, to right wrongs, to straighten what has become crooked, to repair and rebuild what has been torn down. ‘Justice’ means *making things right again at last*, getting the original project back on track.

So if we put Creation and Justice side by side within the present world of sin, sorrow and suffering, what do we have? Certainly not the Platonic picture, where the present world can go to hell while human souls – or some of them anyway – are allowed to escape. What use is that? That simply ignores the goodness of the original creation. Certainly not the Epicurean or Stoic picture, where the world is either going rumbling on doing its own thing or is going round and round in a great cycle of being without anything ever really changing. What use is that? That ignores the original goodness of creation, of the creator’s intention, and particularly the divine longing and intention to put it all right at last. This is the biblical hope: that the God who made the world will put it right at last.

That hasn’t happened yet, obviously. A glance at the newspapers or the television will confirm that. But the biblical message is that the project has begun. In a sense it began when God called Abraham; but that, and the next two thousand years, is best seen as preparation. In a truer sense it began when through Jesus God overthrew the dark powers that have spoiled and corrupted his beautiful world, and particularly the beautiful lives of human beings who were made to be the crown of creation, the agents through whom God would bring his beauty and justice into the world. That happened through Jesus’ kingdom-work, reaching its climax on the cross; and that naturally opened the way for creation to be set free from its slavery to decay, from its corruption and death, *starting with Jesus’ own body*.

This is why the bodily resurrection of Jesus matters so much. Generations of liberal theologians have tried to play it down or deny it altogether, as though it was an early superstition which we can do without. That represents a radical de-Judaizing and de-historical move, and involves undoing one or both of the pillar themes. If God is the good Creator, and if he will at last put everything right, then resurrection is going to be the result. Nobody saw Jesus’ resurrection coming ahead of time, of course, despite the fact that he had been trying to explain it to his followers. But when it happened, this is the sense it made.

That is the real message of Easter morning, as is perhaps clearest in John’s gospel. In John, the resurrection chapter twice tells us forcibly that it was ‘the first day of the week’: first in the morning when Mary Magdalene found the tomb empty and met the risen Jesus himself, supposing him to be the gardener – the right mistake to make; then, in the evening, when the disciples were hiding behind locked doors in the Upper Room, and Jesus came to breathe peace and power and his own Spirit upon them.<sup>11</sup> John has framed these scenes, within his

<sup>11</sup> See John 20.1, 19.

gospel which begins by evoking Genesis 1 itself, in such a way as to say: this is the beginning of the new creation in which the divine intention for the original creation is at last fulfilled. That is why, in one of the greatest Christian poems of all time, Paul writes to the Colossians that Jesus is ‘the beginning; the first-born from the dead; so that in everything he might be pre-eminent.’<sup>12</sup> We will never understand the gospel unless we see it as a great *narrative*, the narrative which finds its way through the dark night of the soul in the long years of Israel’s desolation and then bursts out with new life on Easter morning.

And of course it doesn’t end there. It only makes sense if, having been launched, the new creation is then put to work in the world. That is the primary task of the Holy Spirit: to put into practice what was achieved and launched on Good Friday and at Easter. And we can get a firm handle on what that means if we remember the two key points: creation and justice. A good world, spoiled by hostile and destructive forces, but now to be remade, to be brought through death and out the other side into a new kind of life which death can no longer touch. And though the Holy Spirit can and does work in a thousand different ways of which we hear only the rustle of the passing wind, one of the primary ways the Spirit works is of course through humble, prayerful servants of Jesus, whose hearts have been renewed and whose minds have been enlightened by the powerful gospel so that they not only believe in Jesus’ resurrection – and hence in his victory over the dark powers on the cross – but that they become Resurrection People, both *signs* and *agents* of the new life which will one day flood the whole of creation.

But before we can speak more about this we need to look at the biblical witness to the ultimate divine design. What will this ‘new creation’ actually be?

## 2. The Promised ‘New Creation’

Where is the gospel narrative ultimately going? If we were to take our cue from most modern western Christianity, whether Catholic or Protestant, we might well imagine that the ultimate goal would be to have a great many saved souls living in heaven with Jesus – with the Trinity, in fact. The biblical language about ‘ruling’ – the idea that Jesus’ people will somehow share his reign or rule over the world – is regularly passed over.<sup>13</sup> But this, like resurrection itself, is a non-negotiable part of the package. From Genesis 1 onwards, humans were made to rule in God’s creation – to rule, of course, with gentle stewardship, to enable creation to

<sup>12</sup> Colossians 1.15-20.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Romans 5.17; Revelation 5.10.

be fruitful, to flourish, not to squash or trample or exploit it.<sup>14</sup> This is reaffirmed in Psalm 8, which speaks of humans being ‘crowned with glory and honour’, ruling over the created order.<sup>15</sup> It is powerfully fulfilled in the stories of Jesus in the gospels, when his ‘mighty works’ speak just as much about his true humanity as about his ‘divinity’, though that is a subject for another day. It is what we see particularly in the various approaches to Jesus’ ascension, for which we need to allow the resurrection itself to reconstruct our entire cosmology. With Jesus we realise that what we call ‘heaven’ (God’s space) and what we call ‘earth’ (our space) are designed to work together, to overlap and interlock; and we humans are created for the specific purpose of standing at the threshold between the two, summing up creation’s praises before the creator and exercising responsible authority on his behalf over such bits of the world as may be entrusted to us (starting with our own bodies, a point to which we shall return).

Anyway, the goal of the narrative is then, as gloriously in Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, that one day the creator will sum up all things in Jesus the Messiah, things in heaven and things on earth.<sup>16</sup> Jesus holds them all together and will bring them all together; he is the ultimate heaven-and-earth person, the truly human being who is simultaneously the living embodiment of Israel’s God. This is one of the reasons, I think, why liberal protestant scholars have not wanted to allow Ephesians to be written by Paul. It doesn’t fit the dualist picture that has dominated those traditions. So much the worse for those traditions: it belongs very well with the larger Pauline vision, for instance in Galatians, where Paul speaks of ‘new creation’, the new world that has come about because God has ‘rescued us from the present evil age’.<sup>17</sup> Paul picks up from his Jewish world the idea not only of heaven and earth overlapping but of a ‘present evil age’ which is going on, the time of sorrow and sin and sickness and death, and of the ‘age to come’ which God has long promised. And because of the gospel events these two (present and future) overlap, just as heaven and earth do: the ‘age to come’ has broken in to the ‘present evil age’, so that though the present age rumbles on, and we still sin and die, the power of God’s ‘age to come’ has been let loose by the Spirit in the present time.<sup>18</sup>

The goal, articulated briefly in Ephesians 1, is then spelled out much more fully in two Pauline passages and two Johannine ones. In Paul the passages are Romans 8 and 1 Corinthians 15; the other passages are John 20–21 (the resurrec-

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<sup>14</sup> That this is the primary meaning of the ‘image’ in Genesis 1.26–28 is argued strongly by e.g. J.R. Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Psalm 8.5–8.

<sup>16</sup> See Ephesians 1.10.

<sup>17</sup> Galatians 1.4; 6.15.

<sup>18</sup> See particularly Wright, *History and Eschatology*, ch. 5.

tion narratives with all their overtones) and Revelation 21–22 (the vision of the New Jerusalem). A brief word about each.

Romans 8 is one of the literary glories of the Christian faith. For our purposes the section which matters most is verses 18 to 30. They are of course rooted in the earlier part of the chapter and the letter, but what we note above all is that they have to do with the *rescue and renewal* of creation, not its abandonment. God made this world and (as people sometimes say) he didn't make junk. We have messed up this world – and there are dark forces behind that as well, not just human agency – but God is the judge who will ultimately put everything right. That is the great message of Romans: the ‘righteousness’ or ‘justice’ of God, apparently challenged beyond hope by the failure of the human race, Israel included, but coming in the person of Jesus to take the force of that ruin on to himself and carve out a way through and on to rescue and renewal.<sup>19</sup> The central message is that *God will do for the whole of creation, at the last, what he did for Jesus at Easter* – taking the physical reality that had been broken and smashed beyond belief, rescuing it and restoring it so that it wasn't just in the same state as before but was actually renewed, having gone beyond the reach of corruption and decay altogether.

That, of course, is what we in the modern western world find so difficult to get our minds round. We are used to all physical reality, up to and even including rock-hard things like diamonds, being ultimately subject to decay. You can split and smash them. With human bodies this is of course even more so. For us, physical reality seems always vulnerable, destructible, corruptible. But what we are promised in God's new world is a *non-corruptible physicality*. We are promised this for our own bodies, as Paul insists in Romans 8.9–11. Here the same promise is held out for the entire new creation.

We will come back to Romans 8 in another connection presently. I turn to 1 Corinthians 15, verses 20 to 28. There, in an astonishing passage built up from multiple scriptural references, Paul unfolds the promise contained in Jesus' resurrection. As we saw, Jesus is the first-fruits, and at his second coming all his people will be raised to share his new kind of life (after a time of resting with the Messiah and patient waiting, though Paul doesn't say this here). Then Paul explains: the present time is the overlap, the time when the Age to Come has broken in while the Present Evil Age is still rumbling on. Why, people ask, is there this overlap? Why doesn't God finish the job right away? Because, as he and others explain, God's rescue operation is an act of love, and he is unwilling to foreclose on the many who are presently being wooed and won by the gospel. As in the Sermon on the Mount, when God wants to rescue and transform the world,

<sup>19</sup> On the whole theme of ‘God's righteousness’ in Paul, rooted in scriptural traditions, see my *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (London: SPCK – Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 2013) ch. 10.

to establish his sovereign and saving rule over it (for which the shorthand is ‘the Kingdom of God’), he doesn’t send in the tanks and smash the opposition on the spot. He sends in the poor, the meek, the mourners, the people who are hungry for justice, the pure in heart . . . and the world is changed.<sup>20</sup> It really is. Slaves are free. The public conscience is actually transformed. There are real signs of hope, of the new world, even though there is still a long way to go.<sup>21</sup>

But back to 1 Corinthians 15. Paul describes the present time – the time of overlap between present and future – in terms of the ongoing battle in which the Messiah will implement the victory he won on the cross. ‘He must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet’, he says, quoting Psalm 110 (the favourite Christological text of the early church).<sup>22</sup> Two things are important here. First, the Messiah is *already* reigning, as in Matthew 28 where Jesus already possesses ‘all authority in heaven and on earth’.<sup>23</sup> Second, that reign is active, with a goal in view that hasn’t yet been reached but one day will. And the goal is the utter destruction of all the ‘enemies’ – which are the dark forces that destroy creation. ‘The last enemy to be destroyed is death’.<sup>24</sup> That can only mean the creation of a new world in which death itself has been swallowed up in victory, as Paul says later in the chapter (15.54). This vision is so unlike the normal western ideal of ‘going to heaven’ that perhaps it isn’t surprising that it is often not even glimpsed, let alone grasped. And death – the destruction of the body – is not overcome by the body being cast aside and the soul going to heaven. That is one way – the Platonic way in particular – of *describing* death; Paul speaks of the defeat of death, its abolition. This will mean a new creation, a creation no longer subject to decay and corruption.

The result will be, as Paul hints in Ephesians 1, that God will at last be ‘all in all’.<sup>25</sup> Here’s how I think this works.<sup>26</sup> God makes a world that is other than himself: why would a good God do that, making something that is less than his own perfection? The answer in scripture is that God, in the mystery of his own complex inner life, is the God of utter self-giving love; and his intention is that he will in the end embrace his whole creation within that love. He will be *both* entirely other than the world *and* filling it with his Spirit. What we presently know in the

<sup>20</sup> See Matthew 5.3-12.

<sup>21</sup> See particularly – against the grain of much post-Enlightenment rhetoric – e.g. R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996); L.W. Hurtado, *Why on Earth did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press 2016).

<sup>22</sup> 1 Corinthians 15.25.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 28.18. For a discussion of this, and its relevance to many questions of New Testament eschatology, see Wright, *History and Eschatology*, ch. 4, especially 148-149.

<sup>24</sup> 1 Corinthians 15.26.

<sup>25</sup> Ephesians 1.10; 1 Corinthians 15.28.

<sup>26</sup> I have spelled this out more fully in Wright, *History and Eschatology*, ch. 8.

church, and as individual Christians – that the Spirit dwells within us so that God is both utterly different from us and intimately present within us – is God's desire and design for the whole creation. There is a world of good theology waiting to be unpacked here, but not in our present context.

The vision of the new creation in the Johannine literature is more evocative still. I have already spoken of the 'first day', the theme which shows that, for John the evangelist, the resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of the new creation. That works out, for John, through the vivid scenes in which Jesus comforts Mary and dries her tears, Jesus challenges Thomas and puts an end to his doubts, and Jesus confronts Simon Peter and gives him forgiveness and fresh commission. All those are part of what 'resurrection' entails. And when we then turn to the Revelation of John we see this in its ultimate form. Please note, the last scene in the Bible is not a picture of 'saved souls' going up to a 'heaven' in the sky; it is the New Jerusalem coming down *from heaven to earth*, so that 'the dwelling of God is with humans'.<sup>27</sup> When John says that the 'first heaven and the first earth' had 'passed away', together with the sea, what he clearly means is that the first heaven and earth were corruptible and corrupted, and that this corruptible state has been done away with. The sea, in John's apocalyptic imagery, is the dark and untamed source of evil; if the sea has gone, there is no chance of evil and corruption entering once more, producing a second horrible cycle of sin and death needing a further redemption. No: the new creation is for keeps. It is guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

The point to grasp (and I have been told by many people that our western traditions are so strong that even if they glimpse it with their minds they still find it hard to hang on to) is that the new creation is not a matter of us being taken away to a different sort of place, but of Jesus coming back to transform the present world into the place he wants it to be – and to transform us into being the people he wants us to be. The classic text for this, much misunderstood, is Philippians 3.20-21, where Paul, again drawing on the Psalms, speaks of Jesus as the one who will come *from heaven* to change our humiliated and corrupt old body into the new body which will correspond to his glorious new body. When he says that we are 'citizens of heaven', this does not mean (as in Plutarch) that we are in exile here and looking forward to going back home one day. It means that, like Roman citizens living in the Greek colony called Philippi, we are to be agents and representatives of the mother city right here, and that if things go wrong the Emperor (the saviour, the Lord) will come from the mother city to sort it all out.

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<sup>27</sup> Revelation 21.1-4.

### 3. Signs of New Life Here and Now

All this points to our present life and calling in quite dramatic ways. Once we realise, and celebrate, the fact that Jesus is *already* reigning, we can start to learn, in prayer and liturgy, to celebrate his victory in new ways and to invoke it in praise and prayer, bringing genuine signs of new life, of new creation, to birth in the present world. So many western Christians have fixed their eyes on a distant and escapist ‘heaven’ that, though they may still sense a calling to make a difference in the present world, they have no larger theological framework within which to understand that vocation. In fact, the resurrection of Jesus supplies exactly that. (When I was bishop of Durham I was aware of certain parishes in the diocese which concentrated on ‘saving souls’ and thought that any attempt to make the world a better place was ‘social work’ which ought to be left to the politicians. I was aware of other parishes which were determined to follow Jesus in feeding the hungry and looking after the poor and the weak, but had no idea what his death and resurrection had to do with all of that. Part of my job, it seemed to me, was to interpret them to one another and to bring both into the larger framework of biblical discipleship.)

For a start, we could note the way in which Ephesians follows through on the statement in the first chapter that God’s plan is to sum up, to unite, all things in heaven and earth in the Messiah. For Paul, this has all kinds of spin-offs for the church’s life and work in the present as well as the future: the church is to *model the new creation* in the power of the Spirit. This means, for a start, Jew and Gentile coming together into the single ‘new temple’, the church in which God lives by the Spirit (chapter 2). This startling and unprecedented new reality will shock the rulers of the world (chapter 3). They had tried for centuries to unite people under their rule, but the only person who has been able to do it is Jesus, and as the church lives like that – which is still a major challenge for us today – it is a sign to the world that Jesus is already its true Lord. Then, in the second half of the letter, Paul expounds the twin themes of unity and holiness. These are still massively challenging for churches and fellowships of all kinds, and I suspect it’s partly because we have given up trying to meet this challenge that we then find ‘resurrection’ shrinking so that it simply becomes an odd word for ‘life after death’ or to the mere ‘happy ending’ after the cross. In particular, in chapter 5, Paul sketches one of the points where unity and holiness are most striking: in the Christian vision of marriage, seen as a sign and potent symbol of the original creation now renewed in Jesus the Messiah.<sup>28</sup> John hints at this, too, in his second chapter.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ephesians 5.21-33.

<sup>29</sup> John 2.1-11, where Jesus’ changing of water into wine at a wedding is clearly seen by John as a symbol of the gospel as a whole.

All these passages point to the early Christian vision of restored creation – the way in which the resurrection of Jesus is worked out, through the Spirit, in the *present* renewal of creation, genuinely anticipating the *final* renewal still to come. And hidden in Ephesians 3.10 we find the blueprint for the present renewal through social and political life: the church, in its unity and holiness, is called to be the sign to the watching world that Jesus is Lord and Caesar isn't. Caesar, of course, comes in many forms – in the gods that are worshipped today and always, the gods of money and power and sex, of a self-centred self-fulfilment and self-realization. The body of Christ as a whole, with every Christian called to play his or her part (and to face their own personal battles and struggles as they do so), is to show the world and its rulers that *there is a different way to be human*, the way of the Sermon on the Mount, the way of following Jesus in the power of the Spirit. Thank God that the church has been doing this throughout its history and still is; but I worry, again, that in many western churches both Catholic and Protestant the emphasis is still on ‘how I get to heaven’, with witness to the world a kind of incidental afterthought, rather than on the new creation which has been launched in Jesus’ resurrection and is now to be put to work by the Spirit.

This has obvious implications in the political sphere which will vary from place to place. In countries like mine the churches are still in theory free to live their lives and bear witness, and they are doing that with mixed success. The chief opposition tends to come from the media, who want to keep for themselves the task of telling people how the world should be, and who don’t like the churches trying to do it instead. This will vary in different countries and regions. The point is that the church is to demonstrate the signs of new life which are the genuine anticipations of the new age breaking in already. Those of us in ministry see these from time to time, thank God. Sometimes this is to our surprise; sometimes it occurs *despite* what we have been doing, rather than because of it.

In particular, the fact that God has renewed creation in Jesus, and intends to renew it from top to bottom in the end, should have immediate implications for our care of the planet. If someone gave you a wonderful painting to decorate your home, it wouldn’t be very respectful if you used it as a dart-board, or as a chalkboard for the kids to draw on. And if someone explained that this didn’t matter because the original artist would come one day and mend it and clean it up, you might think that wasn’t the point. But that is how we have often treated God’s good creation. The more we know about how our planet works, the more we see just how badly we, its present caretakers, have been looking after it. There are of course faddish and silly solutions on offer here, just as there are in every walk of life, but that doesn’t mean that the church can go slow on its

responsibilities to understand our human vocation as stewards of creation and to lead the way both in responsible living ourselves and in encouraging and lobbying for larger policies which will bring a measure of God's order to his wonderful but wounded world.

The mysterious heart of all this is the church's life of prayer and sacrament. If we start with a view in which (as in Epicureanism, the ancient philosophy which now dominates the western world) God and the world are a long way off from one another, then prayer and sacrament don't make much sense.<sup>30</sup> Prayer becomes calling up into thin air; sacrament becomes a strange ritual with possible benefit as a visual aid for faith but not much more. But that long-way-off view of God is the wrong place to begin – at least, if we start with the resurrection of Jesus understood in the way the first Christians understood it. We should start with the cosmology which says that heaven and earth overlap and interlock and that we humans are called to stand at the dangerous place where that happens. We should start with the eschatology which says that the present age has already been broken into by the long-promised 'age to come', and that we humans once more are called to live and work at the very place where those tectonic plates grind together. This takes us back, as I hinted earlier, to Romans 8. When we stand at those two points of overlap, we find ourselves groaning in prayer, often without knowing exactly what we ought to be praying for, but then realising – with Paul to remind us – that exactly there and then the Spirit is groaning within us, and the Father is listening, and that in the process we are being shaped according to the likeness of the beloved Son.<sup>31</sup> The Christian life of prayer and sacrament thus draws together all other obligations and vocations and gives them new depth and focus. At the same time, that rhythm of life, of standing where heaven and earth meet, where present and future bump into one another, flows out into the world of service, particularly service to the poor and desolate, those for whom the whole scripture, from the Torah to the Psalms to Jesus to Revelation, has special concern. Learning to meet Jesus himself in the faces of the poor, as in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, is one lesson among many which belong exactly here. The resurrection of Jesus, as an event of past history, opens up new visions for the renewal of creation as a recurring event in present history, until the time of the ultimate renewal which is yet to come.

<sup>30</sup> On modern retrievals of Epicureanism and their widespread influence in today's western world, see Wright, *History and Eschatology*, ch. 1.

<sup>31</sup> Romans 8.26-30.

#### 4. Conclusion

There is, as you might guess, much more that might be said at this point. In closing, let me re-emphasize two things I have said in some of my books but which bear repetition. If we believe that in the end God will put all things right, will ‘do justice’ in that positive, creative, healing, restorative sense; and if we believe that when God raised Jesus from the dead he did exactly that, close up and personal, in the one human being who represented and stood in for everyone else – then we cannot hold back from the imperative to ‘do justice’, in this full sense, at every opportunity in our world. In the power of the Spirit, we must name and shame the injustices that are still rampant, and work for their abolition. And we must take care that in our personal lives, and particularly in the lives of our churches themselves, injustice is rooted out as far and wide as can be done. Only if we are doing this will it make any sense to preach and teach about God’s new creation, about the way in which Jesus’ resurrection resonates out into the renewal, the putting-right, of creation.

The same is true of beauty. If we believe that God made a beautiful world which has been spoiled in so many ways but which still resonates with his love and power; and if we believe that in Jesus God has done the most beautiful thing imaginable – why else would so many artists and musicians devote their best efforts to setting it forth for our awe and contemplation! – then we must make sure that as far as we are able, in our churches and our personal lives, and in the wider communities where we have influence, we are working to foster and celebrate art, music, dance, drama, poetry sculpture, and whatever else we can. If the church is colluding with ugliness; if the church is not recognising, celebrating and giving opportunities for the many artistic gifts of many of its members, then we should not be surprised if people find it hard to believe us when we speak of the way Jesus’ resurrection has launched a new world in which creation itself is renewed, and will be renewed, until the earth is filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.<sup>32</sup> That is the goal. Justice and beauty point the way. By the power of the Spirit, our calling is to be Resurrection people, looking back to Jesus himself and, under his guidance and commission, bringing true signs of renewal into his creation today and every day.

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<sup>32</sup> See Isaiah 11.9; Habakkuk 2.14; and e.g. Psalm 72.19.

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