

A resurrection of hope

Equipped and encouraged by the *HOPE* initiative, churches across Britain are now gearing up for a whole year of all-out ‘words and action’ mission in 2014. Anglican scholar Tom Wright opens some theological windows on this rising movement

The resurrection is the basis of our hope. But most western Christians haven’t thought through what that actually looks like. What God says he’s going to do for the whole world, on the basis of Jesus’ resurrection, affects the way we do everything – from prayer, to evangelism, to service.

We talk in our day about ‘mission-shaped church’. But mission has to be shaped by what in the trade we call *eschatology*. In other words, what you believe about what God has promised to do, eventually must shape the way you do mission.

If you believe, for instance, God is going to throw this whole creation in the bin and leave saved souls sitting somewhere in a timeless, space-less, body-less eternity, then obviously mission is rescuing those disembodied souls for that timeless eternity. So why waste your time planting a tree or saving the whales or anything if this whole world is just rubbish?

Instead you might believe, on the basis of Genesis, Revelation, Romans, John, I Corinthians, Isaiah, that God is actually going to renew this world. I think of those wonderful psalms – 96 and 98 and lots of others like them – which say God is coming to sort the mess out and then all the trees in the fields and the animals and everybody will sing for joy, because the Lord is coming to judge the world.

In the Hebrew mind, ‘judge’ doesn’t mean ‘condemn’. It means to put things right at last, where things have been out of joint. What a judge does is restore order and balance to the world. So God is coming to sort the whole thing out, and the Christian message is – God has actually done that in Jesus.

So the death and resurrection of Jesus are the turning point of the world. But the response is not, 'Phew, we're all going off to heaven'. The risen Jesus says all authority is given to him in heaven and on earth. I suspect we've hardly begun to explore what the '*and on earth*' bit might look like.

However, it obviously goes with the rest of the Gospel, because Jesus told us to pray that God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. So the resurrection of Jesus gives you the energy, and also the template, for what God is going to do to the whole creation at the end. That's what Romans 8 is all about.

But if that's what God is going to do finally, then he's already started it in Jesus. Then everything we do is shaped by the resurrection of Jesus behind us – and the new creation of the whole cosmos up ahead. So we have to re-configure what we're doing in between those two.

ESTABLISHING TRUST

I've seen so many churches in the North East, but also in London and also in America, where actually the 30somethings and the 40somethings and the 50somethings are getting stuck in, are doing stuff. They are realising, 'There's a project I can be involved with here'.

I know an elderly couple, staunch church members, both long since retired, who decided to do meals on wheels. They went on doing this until they were older than all the people they were taking the meals on wheels to! How many people knew they were Christians? People probably knew they were part of the church and that was why they were doing it.

There are some very moving moments in my time as a bishop where I've run into people of all ages, who are not consciously thinking, 'This is my project to do a bit for the kingdom'. But they're prayerful, humble people, responding to needs around them.

I heard of a single mum who'd had a really hard life. There was one person in the street she knew she could rely on. She was the only person who wouldn't put her down and was always there for her. But she didn't know anything about this woman.

One day, when the single mum's daughter was in a school nativity play, someone came up with the idea of performing it in the local church. So they visited the church, and the person giving out the sheets was this woman from down the street. For the first time, the mother realised the reason she trusted and relied on this woman down the street, was actually one of Jesus' people. That single mum is now a Christian.

Part of our problem is we have been impatient. God can and does convert people very quickly. But sometimes, especially in a post-Christian culture, it takes a long time for trust to be established, for people to look and realise this really works – these people are in it for the long haul.

That's the impressive thing. In other words, they're not just after a quick fix, a 'tick the box for a statistic' and then they're not interested in you anymore. This really is about building community.

I was doing a confirmation at Gateshead one night. There was a woman in her 30s who had come to faith. Before I confirmed her, the vicar interviewed her and asked her what had changed in her life.

She said, 'Eee, it's like having a great big second family'. Then she looked round at me and said, 'Was I supposed to say that?' And I replied, 'Yes you were, that means this is a real church'. Church is about being family for anyone coming in.

OPENING SCRIPTURE

I would like to see much more of what we were beginning to see in Durham. Different churches were pulling together on mission projects and on reading the Bible together. We

did *The Big Read* in the North East last year, and that went national this last time round, and it's going to happen again next year.

I'm very excited about Christians reading the Bible together. You just have no idea what's going to happen when people ask for the wisdom of the Spirit and humbly open Scripture and share with one another.

It's very simple. Anyone can do it. And now we have pretty much all the churches across the board wanting to do it. But that's a rooted thing. That's about making sure our roots are in the right place. We read Scripture together to make sure we really are linking arms as much as we can and finding out how much we have in common.

The world is full of important projects that ought to be done by the Church. Some of that will involve serious political work, some of it working with community leaders. But it's much more important that the Church prayerfully discerns where new things need to be done.

Bishop of Manchester Rt Rev Nigel McCulloch was on the radio recently, talking about the hospice movement. It's almost unimaginable now, but almost 60 years ago that movement did not exist. There were no hospices. People were dying painful, sad, angry deaths.

Cicely Saunders and one or two others had a profoundly Christian vision: just because the medical profession had given up on these people, they weren't going to give up on them. 'We may not add years to your life, but we'll add life to your years', was their approach.

Now we have hospices all over the country, almost entirely volunteer-led and usually Christian-led. It's a remarkable thing. Now what might be the next thing we should be doing?

I could take you to Christian projects in the North East where no Government agency has told us to have a playgroup for children of single mums. But the Church has said, 'We

need one of those here – let's get together, who can contribute, who's got some expertise, who will find the place, the money?'

The more signs of hope, the better. And in my experience these do not usually happen top down, from somebody in London or Durham or somewhere, saying from a lofty height we need to see more of this and that.

We need to empower and encourage people on the ground to say, look at your community, ask yourself – what would it look like if God was in charge here? What signs of hope might there be?

And then get together with your three or four friends, ecumenically if possible, study Scripture together, pray for wisdom about how you can be God's agents in making that happen.

DEFEATING EVIL

For we've all misunderstood the gospels. The problem is we say the creeds, we believe in Jesus Christ, only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate – but wait a minute – what about all that stuff in the middle?

And yet because they didn't have that much of a fight about it in the early church, it never got into the creed. But now we've used the creed as a template for teaching, so we think the virgin birth, the crucifixion and the resurrection, mean what they mean without any of the stuff in Matthew chapters 3-26.

Was Matthew wasting his time? No he wasn't. So what was it all about?

I'm determined to put the Gospel back into the Gospels. Jesus was nailed on the cross with the words 'King of the Jews' above him. That's one of the very few things in all four Gospels. That's the climax of his kingdom ministry.

You have to interpret the kingdom ministry in the light of that. He can only be doing the kingdom, because he is defeating the power of evil, which ultimately happens on the cross.

And when he does what he does on the cross, it isn't to save souls for a timeless eternity. It's in order to complete that breaking of the diabolical power which began with the temptations and so on.

It's so that God's new world could be launched in the resurrection.

Tom Wright is a leading New Testament scholar and former Bishop of Durham in the Church of England. He wrote the book Surprised By Hope (SPCK) as part of HOPE08. This article is an extract from an interview he gave with Roy Crowne, Executive Director of HOPE. For more information, please visit www.hopetogether.org.uk

(pull-out quotes)

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