

The Future of Creation

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In these two sermons we shall be thinking about Advent hope. It is rather a pity that Advent has come to be associated so much with preparing for Christmas, the first advent of Christ, and we maybe pass all too quickly over what the Advent season is primarily about: that hope for the future that the coming of Christ at Christmas has given us, the hope for his second advent, when, as the Creed puts it, ‘he will come again in glory.’ It is, of course, a more difficult thing to think about, because it hasn’t happened yet and we may have trouble supposing that it can happen, but it’s vital we think about it. Christians have always been characteristically people of hope – not just being hopeful for this or that to get better in the immediate future, but hopeful for the ultimate future that God will give to his whole creation, a future in which all wrongs will be put right, when (in a lovely image the book of Revelation uses) ‘God will wipe away every tear from every eye,’ when transience and death shall be no more, because God will take his whole redeemed creation into the eternal livingness of his own life. In the two sermons I’ll be stressing two things about this Christian expectation of God’s future for the world: that it is a hope for the whole of creation and that it is centred on Jesus Christ. It is very artificial to separate these two things but one can’t say everything at once and so I shall devote one sermon to each.

When we think about the future, we’re always telling stories, taking the story that has brought us to where we are now, the story so far, and trying, as it were, to read on into the future. As Christians we have a distinctive story. Our faith is about living within the Christian story of God and his creation, a story with a distinct future. It’s the story the Bible tells. Of course, the Bible tells lots of stories – stories about God’s people Israel, stories about Jesus, stories about the early church, but all these little stories belong within an overarching story: the Big story, the story about the meaning of everything, the story that begins with creation in the beginning and ends with new creation at the end. In between, the story of Jesus in particular gives direction to this Big story, pointing it towards the Advent hope. The beginning of the story, the creation of the world, is necessarily told not in literal scientific terms, but in picture and parable. Similarly the end of the story is not told in literal terms. We couldn’t understand it if it were, because it goes so far beyond anything in our experience. In the teaching of Jesus, in Paul’s letters, in the book of Revelation we have the future and final goal of God’s purposes for the world depicted for us in pictures and parables. They tell us more about its meaning than about how it will happen.

The Bible talks about new creation. It’s an idea that goes right back to Isaiah in the Old Testament. New creation doesn’t mean that God is going to replace this world with a completely new one – out of nothing. It means that God will *renew* his creation, radically transforming it, transposing it, as it were, into a new form of existence. When the Book of Revelation speaks of the new heaven and new earth, it also has God say, ‘Behold I am making all things new.’ Not ‘I am making all new things’ – but ‘I am making all things new.’ Not replacement but renovation.

One thing you might think about that picture of a transformation of creation by God in the future is that it doesn’t sound at all like the kind of future for the universe that

scientific cosmology envisages. It isn't, but that is not because scientific cosmology is mistaken (although scientists would agree that their projections of the far future of the universe can only be provisional: they change with better knowledge). But scientific cosmology can only tell us what would happen *if there were no newly creative, transformative act of God*. The new creation is not something that creation can become out of its own resources. It is not where it's headed of its own accord. It is a *new* future that God will give his creation out of his own infinite resources.

It's a future for the whole creation. Advent hope is that big. But I have to admit that Christians, especially perhaps in the modern period, have been all too prone to reduce the holistic scope of the future they expect from God. Let's consider some of those reductive views:

(1) There is the reduction to a hope for the individual after death. Now it's absolutely right that that should be our focus in certain circumstances: bereavement, funerals, times when we think about our loved ones who have gone to be with Christ. Christian faith does, wonderfully and transformatively, give us that kind of sure hope for life beyond death and in God. But in the New Testament that hope is never *merely* individual. It is for the individual to take part in something much bigger, something very social. Jesus' parables sometimes depict it as a wedding feast. It's God's universal kingdom.

(2) Then there is the sort of reduction of Christian hope that happens when we think in terms of a radical distinction between spirit and matter. This mistake runs deep and is very damaging. Christian hope is not about the immortal spirit escaping the body into a purely immaterial realm. The New Testament thinks much more holistically about human nature. In the Creed we say that we believe in the resurrection of the body, but so many Christians don't seem to really believe that. Yet we are fully human persons only as closely integrated body and mind/spirit. It is as embodied selves that God gives us a future in his new creation – radically transformed, of course, in spirit and body both, but transformed as the bodily creatures God has made us to be.

(3) There's that reduction of hope that limits it to humans. This is why I chose for our New Testament reading that passage from Romans where Paul speaks of the whole creation eagerly awaiting the future when it will be set free from the damage we humans have done to it (Rom 8:18-25). Indeed, he portrays a sort of solidarity in hope that unites us with the rest of creation. For ourselves we are awaiting the full salvation that can only come with our bodily resurrection. But our bodies, our material nature, are precisely what unite us with the rest of creation. As bodily creatures we are intimately interconnected with the rest of creation. So it doesn't really make sense to imagine a future in which we are abstracted from our solidarity with the non-human creation. God's future is for the whole of his creation.

(4) Finally, there is a quite different sort of reduction that has happened in the modern period when Christians have taken over the modern idea of historical progress and identified it with the coming of the kingdom of God. By 'progress' here I mean the idea that human history is on a sort of steadily upward moving path that is taking us ever nearer utopia. If I say that that sort of faith in progress has become pretty unbelievable, I don't mean to say that there isn't any sort of progress, only that it isn't

inevitable, that what constitutes progress is often very ambiguous, and that there's plenty of regress too.

Here's a very topical point. One aspect of the idea of progress that most people in western societies still cling to is that we should expect ever rising standards of living. In the last few decades we've enjoyed unparalleled affluence and we suppose that anything like a recession can only be a sort of blip before we get back to unlimited economic growth. No matter that that same economic growth, powered by consumerism, is at the root of all sorts of ecological destruction. It would be very salutary to wonder whether we can't take a different direction.

But the major limitation of the idea of progress in history is that it's hope only for those in the vanguard of history, for those who enjoy the fruits of progress. For the victims of history, often the victims of progress itself, for billions whose lives have been short and miserable, progress offers no hope. It can only leave them behind in the graveyards of history. Christian hope is different because it is hope especially for the victims. It leaves no one behind – no one, that is, who welcomes God's kingdom. It reaches back through the ruins and the graveyards of history and makes all things new. Advent hope is that big.

(5) Just one more reduction of hope. This one does hold out a hope that encompasses all creation, but it sees God's goal purely in terms of restoration. It goes like this: At the beginning everything was just as God meant everything to be. But evil came along and spoiled God's good creation. And that means that God must redeem or save his creation from evil. When he has finally done so, at the end, everything will be once more just as it was in the beginning. In other words, God's purpose from Genesis 3 onwards is restorative. It's as though the finest of paintings has, over the centuries, got dirty and damaged, but the restorers get to work on it, and in the end, when they've finished their work, the painting emerges restored to its pristine glory.

That God will rescue his creation from all that has spoiled it is true. But is that all? Creation before evil came on the scene was good. In Genesis 1 God sees that it is good, he delights in it. But good is not always the same as perfect or complete. One can make a good start. A good seed is good precisely because it will grow into something much more than itself, a plant. So we can suppose that God from the beginning had plans for his creation that he had not yet fulfilled. Creation in the end will be not only creation redeemed from the damage evil has done to it, as if that were not enough. It will far exceed the first creation. It will be the promise of the first creation finally fulfilled.

Actually there is a remarkable parallel between the beginning of the Bible and the end. In Genesis 3 we see Adam and Eve in paradise – before the fall. Then in the last chapter of Revelation, the last chapter of the whole Bible, we see paradise restored. We see the tree of life (from Genesis 3) now flourishing beside the water of life that flows through the centre of the new Jerusalem. The end is a return to the beginning, but it is much more than that. There's no city of Jerusalem in Genesis 3. At the end paradise is restored, but with added value. The end exceeds the beginning.

So Advent hope is not just for the spiritual bit of our nature but for the whole creation, not just for individuals but for the whole creation, not just for humans but for the

whole creation, not just for future history but for all history. Advent hope is that big. It's holistic, inclusive. It encompasses everything except evil.

But what difference does that sort of hope make here and now? It makes a huge difference to how we see the world and how we live in it, perhaps especially in times when other sorts of hope seem to be running out.

I'll make three main points. (1) This kind of hope says something about the value of the created world. God has not made a disposable creation, a throwaway world, but a world that he values and cherishes to the extent that he will not let it perish, but will give it new life eternally. That says something about the value of every human being, precious to God, destined for eternity. But not only humans. How arrogant of us to think, as Christians often have, that we are the only creatures God values and cherishes to such an extent. No, God's future is for his whole creation. And so we should value it too.

(2) Advent hope says something about the value of what we do when we try to live for God and to do good in this world. Paul, at the end of his great chapter on resurrection, concludes: 'Therefore, beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast ... always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain' (1 Cor 15:58). In the Lord everything we do for him has a future. If it's worth anything God will gather it into his kingdom. Nothing will prove to be in vain, nothing will be lost.

(3) New creation is already happening here and now. There's a remarkable passage in 2 Corinthians where Paul says this: 'If anyone is in Christ – there is new creation. Everything old has passed away; behold, everything has been made new' (2 Cor 5:17). What Paul does there is to take language the Bible uses about the new creation of all things and use it to describe what it means to be a Christian. In Christ the transformative power of God's new creation is already powerfully at work in the world and we can share in it. Of course, it's a *beginning*. It doesn't reduce the need for hope. Actually it nourishes our hope to know that God has already begun what he promises.