

Call to Worship

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust." (Ps 91:1-2)

Worship in song

1. Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia! Sons of men and angels say, Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia! Sing, ye heav'ns, and earth, reply, Alleluia!
2. Lives again our glorious King, Alleluia! Where, O death, is now thy sting? Alleluia!
Once He died our souls to save, Alleluia! Where thy victory, O grave? Alleluia!
3. Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia! Fought the fight, the battle won, Alleluia!
Death in vain forbids His rise, Alleluia! Christ hath opened paradise, Alleluia!
4. Soar we now where Christ hath led, Alleluia! Following our exalted Head, Alleluia!
Made like Him, like Him we rise, Alleluia! Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!

Reading from the Psalms

Psalm 62:1-8

Prayer of confession

Father, you have invaded our ignorance with your truth,
You have invaded our meaninglessness with your purpose,
You have rescued us from insignificance by declaring your love for us.
You call us your children but we have not always carried this identity well.
We have been content to be superficially religious
rather than be transformed by Christ within us.
We have a greater passion for doctrine than the spiritual destiny of our neighbour.
We have hidden ourselves in busyness so we don't see to care.
Whilst Jesus died for strangers he did not know,
We die of impatience in the traffic.
Whilst you stopped to heal a passing women tormented with sickness,
we dismiss the needy with a flick of a TV remote.
We have become conformed to the world
and lost our calling to transform the world.
We have forgotten our call to be heroes in a land of grey.
We have forgotten to love and laugh with friends who seek your truth.
Forgive us Father.
Give us Jesus' passion for people, Jesus' courage for mission, Jesus' truth for
authority, Jesus' joy in mission, and Jesus' eternal reward.

Assurance of forgiveness

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 Jn 1:9)

Prayer of thanksgiving

Loving God, we bless you for who you are.

You could have been a tyrant requiring human sacrifices. But you are not like that.

You could have required self mutilation and frenzied worship. But you are not like that.

You could have been careless of your creation and apathetic to our cries of hurt. But you are not like that.

You could have been a weak god, helpless in the jaws of fate and chance. But you are not like that.

You could have remained distant from us, aloof in your holiness. But you are not like that.

You could have chosen disorder, chaos and ugliness. But you are not like that.

You could have made a virtue of evil, abuse and destruction. But you are not like that.

You are a God with a character that is altogether beautiful, gracious and holy.

Your morality, compassion and love leave us amazed and in awe.

We are so grateful for who you are and we worship you that we are.

Holy Communion

There was day, once a year, when the entire Jewish nation held its breath as they asked themselves whether God could possibly forgive his people yet again?

It was the job of the High Priest to perform a ceremony that enabled the Jewish people to access the forgiveness of God. Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, two goats were brought to the temple. One goat was sacrificed to symbolically pay the price for the sins of the people. The other goat stayed alive. The High Priest would place his hands on the head of the goat and symbolically transfer the sins of the people to the goat. This goat was then taken out of the city and set free in the wilderness. It became the scapegoat who symbolically took the sins of the people away.

The Day of Atonement was a vital day in the life of God's people. On this day, the High Priest sprinkled the blood of the sacrificed goat (or lamb) in the Holy of Holies, a room in the heart of the temple that symbolised the very presence of God. The room was considered so holy that only the High Priest was allowed to go there once a year to perform this ritual.

As important as these rituals were, the Jews knew that no sacrifice of an animal could ever really take away the sins of the people. God required this ritual because he was making the point that sin could not be overlooked. It needed to be dealt with. God instituted this ritual because it foreshadowed a time in history when he would come to us as the man Christ Jesus. Jesus would allow himself to be sacrificed on a cross and shed his blood for your sins and mine. He did this to pay the price for our sins that would otherwise disqualify us from God's presence.

Before Jesus died, he asked us to remember his sacrifice by sharing bread and wine together. This we gladly do.

Thank you Lord Jesus for paying the price for our sins on the cross. We honour you as we share bread and wine together.

Message WHAT HAPPENS AFTER YOU DIE?

What happens after you die? There seems to be enormous confusion about the subject. If you go to funerals of unbelievers, you will discover a massive confusion about what they believe for their loved one who has just died. What usually happens is that they give in to sentimentality and read poems that say things like:

- I am not really dead. I am in the raindrop and in the breeze.
- I am not really dead. I am joined with the great circle of life of which you too are part.

Neither are true, but as someone said once: “Funerals are no time for truth”. So it is that a sentimentality that has more in common with Buddhism seems to pervade.

Sadly, many in the Christian church seem to be equally confused. At Christian funerals, it is not uncommon to hear that the loved one who has died:

- is now an angel in heaven. (This is not true).
- has now been given their resurrected body and are with Jesus in his new kingdom. (This is not true ...at least not yet.)

So what happens when we die? The confusion about it is remarkable, considering that the Christians of the first two centuries were fairly clear and consistent about what would happen. This is evidenced by the fact that when some in the Corinthian church started to deny the resurrection (1 Cor 15:12; 2 Tim 2:17-18) the apostle Paul was able to correct them without ambiguously.

The nature of resurrection was vague with Judaism, but its concept became clearly defined with Christianity. The church held the resurrection to be of central importance. Tom Wright, Bishop of Durham, writes:

Take away the stories of Jesus' birth, and all you lose is two chapters in Matthew and two in Luke. Take away the resurrection and you lose the entire New Testament and most of the second-century fathers as well.¹

What does the Bible say?

Matthew 22:23-32

Jesus spoke about the resurrection in Mt 22:23-32 in which he taught:

- that right teaching about the resurrection can be obtained from Scripture
- that resurrected people will be like the angels (but would not be angles) in that relationships would be taken to whole new level in eternity – superseding even those of marriage
- that the resurrection will be a future event, not something that happens now when people die

¹ Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London, SPCK, 2007) p.54.

1 Corinthians 15

In his most comprehensive discussion on resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul stresses the central importance of the resurrection, and makes it clear that if Jesus had not been resurrected (but had simply disappeared into some sort of spiritual state) death would not have been defeated and we would have no hope of resurrection ourselves.²

In the same passage, Paul contrasts our current physical body with our future resurrected spiritual body (1 Cor 15:44). The Greek word for 'physical' is *psychikos* (from which we get the word psyche, meaning 'soul'). The suffix *-ikos*, indicates that the word does not refer to the physical form but to the power or energy that drives it.³ Therefore, when Paul spoke about our future body being a spiritual body, he did not mean it would be a non-material body. He meant that it would not be a body animated by the normal human soul, but a body that is animated by God's Spirit (*pneuma* = God's breath). In other words, the resurrected body would not be a disembodied spiritual phantom, but would have a transformed physicality.

Similarly, when Paul says in 1 Cor 15:50 that *flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God*, he does not mean that physicality will be abolished. "Flesh and blood" is a technical term for that which is corruptible, transient and headed for death.⁴ The new body would be incorruptible (eternal).

Philippians 3:20-21

Paul taught in Phil 3:20-21 that our resurrected body would be "like" Jesus' resurrected body, i.e. real but transformed so that it is different.

Genesis 1

Genesis teaches us that before things got spoilt by sin, God liked what he had made (Gen 1:31). Further than that: creation reflected something of God's intrinsic nature. God created human beings to reflect his image. As Tom Wright puts it: we were,

'designed to reflect God, both to reflect God back to God in worship, and to reflect God into the rest of creation in stewardship'.⁵ He goes on to say: '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'.⁶

Romans 8:18-25

You don't go to a purely spiritual heaven when you die. Romans 8:18-25 teaches us that just as we will have transformed bodies, so creation itself will be transformed. This means that a transformed physical reality will continue to exist. This thinking is supported by Revelation, chapters 21 and 22.

² *Ibid.* p.111.

³ *Ibid.* p.168.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.* p.104.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 107

Understand the resurrection of Jesus

Our model is Jesus

The model to look at when seeking to understand the resurrection is the resurrection of Jesus. Therefore, it is important to understand it. Whilst there are differences in the resurrection account about Jesus (as you would expect from different eye witnesses to any incident), the following features are undisputed:

- the body of Jesus was missing from the tomb
- the discovery that Jesus' body was missing was made by women (considered to be unreliable witnesses in Jesus time, indicating that it is unlikely that this story was fabricated)
- an angel of God told the disciples Jesus had risen from the dead. The disciples did not expect Jesus to rise from the dead and were surprised. Nothing in their Jewish tradition had prepared them for this experience. Notwithstanding the enlightenment, it isn't the case that ancient people were credulous and modern people sceptical. There is a great deal of credulity in the modern world and there was a great deal of scepticism in the ancient world. Thomas, like any good scientist and theologian, wanted to see and touch the resurrected body of Jesus before he believed (Jn 20:24-28).

Tom Wright says:

The world could cope with a Jesus who ultimately remains a wonderful idea inside his disciples' minds and hearts. The world cannot cope with a Jesus who comes out of the tomb, who inaugurates God's new creation right within the middle of the old one.⁷

The key teaching of the New Testament is that Jesus was the first one resurrected, (the "first fruit") and that those who put their trust in him would, at some future date, be similarly resurrected. In this sense, the resurrection of Jesus meant that the resurrection had begun... and would be completed to include everyone else when Jesus returns on the last day.

Therefore, the resurrection is not:

- simply having fond memories of the dead (and therefore a nicer way to describe death)
- simply the redistributing of the persons' atoms into other created forms

The significance of the resurrection, pioneered by Jesus, was that it spelt the defeat of death.⁸ The worst that Satan could threaten us with was death. The resurrection of Jesus saw the defeat of death's ultimate power.

The resurrection of Jesus is not a very odd event within the natural world, but is *'the utterly characteristic, prototypical and foundational event within the world as it has begun*

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 80

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

*to be. It is not an absurd event within the old world but a symbol and starting point of the new.*⁹

Jesus, the 'first fruit'

The Jewish festival of Passover commemorated God's saving grace in rescuing the Jews from slavery in Egypt. The Jews extended the meaning of Passover to also thank God for the 'first fruits' of the wheat harvest (another saving grace).¹⁰ Paul applies this 'first fruit' imagery to Jesus. Jesus (the embodiment of God's saving grace towards us) is the "first fruit" to rise from the dead (1 Cor 15:20). We will follow on later.

Marriage

Another imagery used to talk about the resurrection is that of marriage. In Revelation 21 – 22, we learn that a New Jerusalem will come down from heaven and be married to a renewed earth. Heaven and earth will combine, and God will no longer be partly separated from his creation (Rev 11:15; 21:1-3). God's resurrected people will be joined (married) to Jesus. This scenario is anticipated in the Lord's Prayer, "...your kingdom come on earth, as it is in heaven".

Tom Wright says: *At no point in the gospels or Acts does anyone say anything remotely like, 'Jesus has gone into heaven, so let's be sure we can follow him.' They say, rather, 'Jesus is in heaven, ruling the whole world and he will one day return to make that rule complete.'*¹¹

Get you thinking right

Western thought has been very much influenced by Greek Platonic thinking. Plato drew a sharp distinction between the physical world (which was evil) and the spiritual world (which was good). He saw reality only as a shadow of a spiritual reality that was to come. This sort of thinking led to people thinking that the life to come was a disembodied spiritual one, and that we should look forward to getting rid of our imperfect physical state. This sort of thinking has even persuaded some Christians to say that it is okay to pollute and pillage the Earth of its natural resources, because physical things are evil and God is going to sweep it all away, and take us to be with him in a non-physical spiritual kingdom.

People can make two mistakes in thinking about our current physical existence.

1. First, the optimists (the humanists and the theological liberals) say we are evolving into better people and, with improving education, existence will turn out to be better and better. We don't need resurrection, because we will engineer our own.

⁹ *Ibid.* p.78.

¹⁰ The feast of Passover (when the judgement of God 'passed over' the Hebrew people) was followed 50 days later by the feast of Pentecost which commemorated the people arriving in Sinai where they were given God's law (commandments). Both festivals also became times of harvest thanksgiving. The first barley crop was celebrated at Passover and the first wheat crop was celebrated at Pentecost.

It is interesting to note that Passover represented God's judgement passing safely over people and Pentecost represents being told how to live rightly. This is directly paralleled in the New Testament with Jesus dying at Passover, causing God's judgement to pass safely over people, and God giving the church the Holy Spirit fifty days later to empower us and equip us to live rightly.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p. 128.

Notwithstanding such rhetoric and jingoism, there is no evidence that humankind is getting better, or that the environment we are in charge of is improving. In fact, scientist tell us that the universe will inevitably dye as it slides down the entropic slope and disappears as low level radiation.

2. The other mistake people can make is to be a pessimist (like Plato, Buddha and the Gnostics). These people say that reality is an illusion. We should hurry through this toxic, painful, physical reality to our preferred final spiritual state.

Wright says that with a correct understanding of God's kingdom, the church is '*set free both from the self-driven energy that imagines it has to build God's kingdom all by itself, and the despair that supposes it can't do anything until Jesus comes again. We do not build the kingdom all by ourselves but we do build for the kingdom.*'¹²

The 'second coming' of Jesus is no afterthought of the Christian message; it hasn't been bolted on to the outside of the gospel, it confronts us with God's future plan for us and his creation. Christians have a story that not only has a beginning and an middle, but also an end.

The question is: Are you ready for it?

Prayers for others

Pray with passion for those things God has placed on your heart, remembering the persecuted church, world events, the sick and our leaders.

Benediction

*Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!
Amen. (Eph 3:20-21)*

This service was prepared for HopeNet SA by Nick Hawkes

¹² *Ibid.* pp.156-157.