

# THY KINGDOM COME

## ON EARTH AS IN HEAVEN

### Luther Zeigler

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While I am a priest ordained in the Episcopal Church and educated and formed by the Anglican tradition, I do not pretend to represent our church's doctrine on this subject. I make this disclaimer in part because there is a diversity of perspectives within our tradition on Christian hope for resurrected life and in part because, if you know anything about Anglicanism, you probably know that we tend to be suspicious about doctrinal debates as such, at least when they are untethered from the experience of worship. We are a tradition guided by the maxim *lex orandi, lex credendi*—meaning, roughly, our praying shapes our believing. For most Episcopalians, as for most Anglicans, the *liturgy*—or the experience of the worshipping community—is at the heart of who we are as Christians, much more so than creeds, confessions, or any attempt to develop a systematic theological statement. Put simply, if you want to know what Episcopalians believe, come worship with us.

To some, this may sound like a bit of a dodge—that we Anglicans are either lacking in clear conviction or that we are so intent on holding together a compromise between Protestant and Catholic impulses that we end up finessing the precise contours of what we actually believe by hiding behind our liturgy. But let me suggest that something else a bit more principled may be going on here, and that is the insight that in the early church there was in fact a liturgical tradition before there was a common creed and before there was an officially sanctioned biblical canon. Common prayer, common Eucharistic practice, common song, and shared patterns of community life held the earliest Christian communities together more so than bare creeds or theology. And it is on this insight that we Anglicans hang much of our identity.

With this in mind, my initial temptation today was to answer the question “What do Episcopalians believe lies beyond the grave?” by actually walking you through the liturgy of the *Book of Common Prayer* for All Saints’ Day, that feast day on our church calendar that points us toward the Christian hope for resurrected life. And if I had done so, we would have opened by singing together the great William Walsham How hymn “For All the Saints,”<sup>1</sup> set to the glorious music of Ralph Vaughn Williams. We would have heard lessons from the texts appointed for that day, like Revelation 21:1–6, which promises the re-creation of “a new heaven and a new earth,” and the arrival of a New Jerusalem, a home for God among his creatures, where “He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people.”<sup>2</sup> We then would have moved from the liturgy of the word to the liturgy of the table, experiencing anew the Eucharistic drama of Jesus Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension and how that sacramental rite empowers us to be kingdom bearers as we, his followers, are sent out into the world, sustained by an ultimate vision of resurrected life in God’s kingdom, which was inaugurated by Jesus Christ but has yet to be fully realized. And along the way, we would have prayed, as we always do when we gather for worship, the words Jesus taught us to pray, saying, among other things, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

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Had I the time to do such an instructed Eucharist of our All Saints' Day liturgy, I am convinced you would have walked away from the exercise with a richly textured sense of what we Episcopalians believe lies beyond the grave, even as we may not always be able to articulate that hope adequately in words. Happily for me, however, I am the grateful beneficiary of a masterful work on the subject of Christian hope by one of the great bishops in the Anglican Church, Tom Wright, whose book *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*<sup>3</sup> distills in a clear and fresh way what is expressed in our liturgy on the subject of Christian hope, and it is upon Bishop Wright's book that I will rely for much of what I will share with you today. In my humble opinion, Bishop Wright's book is one of the most important books written on the subject of this conference in the last several decades, and if you take nothing else away from my remarks today, I hope that you will at least be convinced by the time I'm finished that Bishop Wright's book is worth your study.

That leads me to my second qualification: I come to you neither as a biblical scholar nor as a professional theologian but rather as a humble university chaplain. The calling of a chaplain is, among other things, to be an interpreter of a tradition, a companion who walks alongside students who are desperately searching for meaning, purpose, and hope for their lives. What a good chaplain aims to do is to share with these students what his or her tradition has to offer in response to these big life questions, which is precisely why I am so enthusiastic about Bishop Wright's work on this subject because, as I shall try to suggest, one of the great virtues of his book is that he explains the Christian hope in a manner that is at once biblically grounded, theologically sophisticated, yet expressed in an entirely fresh and accessible way that speaks directly to the lived experience of our contemporary context.

With all that said, let me now summarize four key themes of Bishop Wright's book. My aim here is not to defend or argue for this conception of the Christian hope but rather, in keeping with the spirit of this

ecumenical conference, merely to describe a vision of that hope that many of us in the Anglican communion find fresh and compelling.

**THEME 1: THE CHRISTIAN HOPE IS  
FUNDAMENTALLY NOT ABOUT LEAVING THIS  
WORLD FOR ANOTHER ONE CALLED HEAVEN**

Contrary to popular conceptions of the afterlife, and even to what most folks sitting in the pews may think, the Christian hope of a future life is not about dying and then leaving this world for some ethereal place in the sky called heaven. We know this first and foremost from Jesus's own preaching and teaching about God's kingdom, which consistently refers not to some postmortem destiny, not to an escape from this world into another one, but rather to a new age in which God will rule over a new heaven and a new earth. Our hope, according to Wright, is not going to heaven when we die but rather to the glorious day when God will make all things new and heaven and earth will merge in a newly created cosmos.

This is precisely the vision articulated in the twenty-first chapter of the Revelation to John, and it is what we pray for when we pray our Lord's Prayer and ask for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. We should think of God's kingdom not as some separate sphere of existence but rather as a divine space-time reality that is interlocking with the course of human history, a divine reality that is already present by virtue of the resurrection and Jesus's ascension as Lord over all creation, but one that will not be fully realized until the end of time. "Salvation, then, is not 'going to heaven' but 'being raised to life in God's new heaven and new earth.'"<sup>4</sup>

**THEME 2: THE CHRISTIAN HOPE IS FOR  
NEWLY EMBODIED LIFE, NOT A DISEMBODIED,  
SPIRITUAL EXISTENCE**

So much popular thinking about the afterlife is rooted in a crude Platonic dualism that views human beings as made up of immortal souls or spirits tethered to mortal bodies. On this view, when we die, our immortal spirit leaves our decaying body for some other place called heaven. Yet this is not a view that finds much support in the New Testament. What we find in the New Testament, rather, is a conception of human identity that is an integrated mind-body-spirit unity, and the resurrection hope we have is for a newly re-created and embodied life.

The foundation for this hope for resurrected human life is, of course, the resurrected Christ himself. Jesus was raised bodily. The Gospel writers are keen to emphasize this point: the same Jesus who was physically present to his followers before his death, appears to them afterwards as an embodied presence, not some spiritualized vision. As Rowan Williams, our former archbishop of Canterbury, puts it: “In his ministry, Jesus created and sustained the community of his friends by speech and touch and the sharing of food; and so, after his resurrection, that community is sustained in the same way. It is not taken away from history, from matter, from bodies and words.”<sup>5</sup> Our hope for resurrected life is, therefore, precisely this: a newly created, embodied life, as St. Paul goes to great lengths to explain in chapter 15 of his first letter to the Corinthians. The *telos* toward which the narrative arc of God’s story is heading is a glorified, *incarnational* reality. As Bishop Wright neatly sums up this point, “The risen Jesus is both the *model* for the Christian’s future body and the *means* by which it comes about.”<sup>6</sup>

### **THEME 3: THE CHRISTIAN HOPE IS ABOUT COSMIC RENEWAL, NOT MERELY INDIVIDUAL SALVATION**

One unfortunate legacy of post-Enlightenment thinking is an unhealthy preoccupation with the individual and the individual's own destiny. Yet, if we return to the biblical narrative, we see that the focus of the biblical story is not so much on personal salvation as it is the formation by God of a covenantal *people* to join him in his ultimate aim to renew the entire *cosmos*. Romans 8:19–24 is a key text here: as St. Paul so memorably expresses it, the whole “creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God,” and our Christian “hope [is] that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption and into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.” To quote Wright, “What creation needs is neither abandonment nor evolution but rather redemption and renewal; and this is both promised and guaranteed by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. This is what the whole world is waiting for.”<sup>7</sup>

Preoccupied as we human beings are with our own individual futures, such self-absorption is but a reflection of a sinful narcissism that is rooted in a forgetfulness of God's much broader and more glorious redemptive purposes. The question of “what happens to me after death is *not* the major, central, framing question,” argues Bishop Wright, adding:

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 re-creation 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 also in the sense that part of the whole point of being saved in the present is so that we can play a vital role (Paul speaks of this role in the shocking terms of being ‘fellow workers with God’) within that larger picture and purpose.

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As he goes on to explain, this insight

in turn makes us realize 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 that the creator God will launch in his new world?* The choice before humans would then be framed differently: are you going to worship the creator God and discover thereby what it means to become fully and gloriously human, reflecting his powerful, healing, transformative love into the world? Or are you going to worship the world as it is, boosting your corruptible humanness by gaining power or pleasure from forces within the world but merely contributing thereby to your own dehumanization and further corruption of the world itself?<sup>8</sup>

This understanding of resurrection as new creation thus points us forward, toward God's hope for a transformed future, rather than just looking backward at the resurrection as a mere historical fact. Bishop Wright puts it this way:

The resurrection is not, as it were, a highly peculiar event within the *present* world (though it is that as well); it is, principally, the defining event of the *new* creation, the world that is being born with Jesus. If we are even to glimpse this new world, let alone enter it, we will need a different kind of knowing. . . . Hope is what you get when you suddenly realize that a different worldview is possible, a worldview in which the rich, the powerful, and the unscrupulous do not after all have the last word. The same worldview shift that is demanded by the resurrection of Jesus is the shift that will enable us to transform the world.<sup>9</sup>

#### **THEME 4: THE CHURCH'S MISSION IS TO BECOME A COMMUNITY OF KINGDOM BEARERS**

If the renewal of all creation is God's ultimate aim, then the church's role in the present is to embody an alternative order that stands as a sign of these redemptive purposes. This is made possible, of course, only by virtue of our baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ and our allegiance to the ascended Christ as Lord of all, which opens up a life of faith in God's continuing activity in our world and a hope for the promised new creation. "The revolutionary new world, which began in the resurrection of Jesus—the world where Jesus reigns as Lord, having won the victory over sin and death—has its frontline outposts in those who in baptism have shared his death and resurrection. The intermediate stage between the resurrection of Jesus and the renewal of the whole world is the renewal of human beings—you and me!—in our own lives of obedience here and now."<sup>10</sup>

Thus, we are not mere bystanders in this cosmic drama. On the contrary, since we have been created in the image of God, we are called to be his collaborators. "God intends his wise, creative, loving presence and power to be *reflected*—imaged, if you like—into his world *through* his human creatures. He has enlisted us to act as his stewards in the project of creation." That is, "through the work of Jesus and the power of the Spirit, [God] equips humans to help in the work of getting the project back on track." Some critics of Wright object that this sounds like works righteousness. But Wright is careful to insist that we are not the one's building the kingdom; that is purely God's doing. But God's loving purposes for us include allowing us to participate in his re-creation. So, as Wright puts it, "the objection about us trying to build God's kingdom by our own efforts, though it seems humble and pious, can actually be a way of hiding from responsibility, of keeping one's head well down when the boss is looking for volunteers."<sup>11</sup>

So, what then, does it look like to be a kingdom bearer? Again, we look to the resurrection for guidance, for in resurrecting his Son, God not only defeated sin and death but vindicated Christ's humanity as a sign



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of the new humanity toward which we are all called. Thus, every aspect of Jesus's life—his teaching, his welcoming, his healing, his sharing, his compassion, his forgiving, his community building, his prophetic challenges to unjust social arrangements—all of these dimensions of Christ's being in the world become for us a guide as to how we too may become kingdom bearers.

What is so inspiring about this aspect of the Christian hope is that we suddenly realize that everything we do in our day-to-day lives—from the smallest gestures of kindness to the noblest acts of bravery—are in fact a vital part of God's kingdom coming into reality. As Wright so eloquently phrases it:

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 to walk; every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow human beings and for that matter one's fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world—all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make. That is the logic of the mission of God. God's recreation of his wonderful world, which began with the resurrection of Jesus and continues mysteriously as God's people live in the risen Christ and in the power of his Spirit, means that what we do in Christ and by the Spirit in the present is not wasted. It will last all the way into God's new world. In fact, it will be enhanced there.<sup>12</sup>

Let me conclude my remarks and this summary of Bishop Wright's vision of Christian hope by observing that this renewed understanding of the church's mission has important implications for evangelism as well. For too long, I think, evangelism has been framed in both individualistic and cognitive terms: as if the Christian project is to save individual souls

through apologetics—that is, by seeking to persuade another person to believe this or that about Jesus Christ so that he or she might be saved. It's not that such a strategy is unworthy or wrong, but we might do well to ask whether a better way to build for the kingdom might be to focus more on compelling practices and patterns of resurrected living in community, rather than on private beliefs per se. Most of the young people I engage with on campus each day are much more moved—and ultimately persuaded—by authentically embodied expressions of Christian love, mercy, forgiveness, care, and the like, than they are by any set of claims. It's not more arguments that the Church needs, but more compelling examples of faithful people whose lives give quiet but powerful witness to the truth of the gospel and its promise of a new creation.

For many of us in the Anglican tradition, our faith is as much a way of life as it is a system of thought, as much a rhythm of life-giving practices as a collection of beliefs, as much a way of relating to others and the created world as a prescription for understanding it.

Long before Christianity became an institutionalized religion with creeds and confessional statements, it was known simply as “the Way” and was organized around a commitment to Jesus Christ as the divine embodiment of a new humanity and a new model for human community. In the early church, what differentiated Christians from others in the empire were primarily *practices* that pointed to the kingdom: the early Christians gave to the poor; cared for the sick; established communities without regard to class, social status, privilege, or gender; shared their resources without possessiveness; practiced hospitality to strangers and foreigners; repented of their sins with humility; sought and extended forgiveness; exercised an unrelenting ministry of reconciliation; prayed with regularity; and tried, individually and in community, to embody the fruits of a Spirit-filled life (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control), among the many other hallmarks of Christian living.

It's not that an understanding of scripture and statements of belief were unimportant to early Christians; certainly they were. The point is

just that early Christians viewed their beliefs as inextricably bound up with the incarnational reality of seeking to live as the Body of Christ in the world. As Jesus himself said in the one parable he shared with his disciples about the Final Judgment, the famous parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, what will separate the sheep from the goats on the Day of Judgment will be less about our beliefs per se and more about whether and how we have cared for the least among us. By carefully articulating the foundations and life-giving shape of our hope in Christ, Bishop Wright has, I would respectfully submit, shown us how resurrected living here and now may give us the surest glimpse of the kingdom that lies beyond the grave.<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

1. The hymn may be found in *The Hymnal 1982, According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Church Publishing, 1985), hymn no. 287.
2. All scripture references in this article come from the New American Standard Bible.
3. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008). All citations in the text are to this edition.
4. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 198.
5. Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002), 92–93.
6. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 149.
7. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 107.
8. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 184–85.
9. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 72–73, 75.
10. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 249.
11. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 207.
12. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 208–9.
13. For a particularly thoughtful review of Bishop Wright's book, and one that draws comparisons to Latter-day Saint theological perspectives on

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the afterlife, see Robert L. Millet, "For Heaven's Sake: A Review of N. T. Wright's *Surprised by Hope*," *Religious Educator* 10, no. 3 (2009): 219–36.