

## Creation to New Creation

I have been asked to present a coherent Christian worldview and to indicate how this worldview shapes our approach to life and its issues.

God does this using 66 books of the Bible written over a period of some 2000 years. So I'm not sure about my chances of doing this in one sermon delivered in 20-odd minutes.

We need a good lens to catch the whole sweep of biblical thought in one shot. That lens is provided by what Jesus called his 'lifting up'. Jesus said, *"But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself"* (12:32). John explains, *"He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die."* The Wisdom literature of the Bible, books like Job, the Psalms, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, repeatedly teaches that the wise are those who take death seriously. There is no greater door to wisdom than through the door which swings open at the foot of the cross.

When Jesus spoke about being lifted up from the earth he was referring to his death, to being lifted up on a cross. But a dead man draws flies to himself and repels people. So how can Jesus say he will draw all people to himself?

In 2004 one of the Bee Gees, Maurice Gibb died in a Miami hospital. Irish comic Graham Norton enraged surviving brother, Robin Gibb, when, as Maurice Gibb was dying, he quipped, "I bet Maurice Gibb's heart monitor was singing the tune of Stayin' Alive."

The heart can beat any tune it likes, but nobody has been able to stay alive. You've heard that old weather forecasters never die, they reign forever. You've heard that Walt Disney didn't die but is in suspended animation. These jokes are humorous precisely because death is so utterly final. On extremely rare occasions a person thought to be dead resuscitates. But even Lazarus eventually died. Jesus is the only person in the entire course of human history to bodily return to life and never die. The whole of Christianity and the entire integrity of the biblical worldview stands on this. Jesus came from heaven to earth, when he who was fully God became flesh. Jesus' death begins the process which results in Jesus being fully 'lifted up from the earth', returning to heaven where he now rules the universe at the right hand of God. He has poured out his Spirit and it is through his Spirit and through his Word that Jesus is now drawing people to himself from every tribe, tongue, people and nation.

Jesus' death, resurrection, ascension and rule are all concerned with gathering a people. This people is the new humanity recreated in God's image - a people, who in their character will be like Jesus. The death of Christ is essential if such a new humanity is to be created. Why? Because people are far from sharing the character of Jesus. The image of God has been distorted. The old humanity is corrupt.

The Bible drums into us how morally depraved we all are. As early as Genesis 6 we read *"The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time."* That's when God destroys people with the Great Flood. But the Flood does not remove our inner depravity. Afterwards, when Noah pleases God by making animal sacrifices we read:

*"The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: 'Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood' (Gen 8:21).*

A person was once asked, "Do you believe in original sin?" He answered, "I don't know. How original do you want to be?" From the Bible we learn that our sinfulness is

original, every inclination of our hearts is evil from childhood, indeed we are all thoroughly corrupt from birth.

The Bible teaches: "*The wages of sin is death*" (Romans 6:23). Given such lousy wages we need a new boss. Actually we have been treated as slave labour. We are like the poor blacks in New Orleans who had no means of getting themselves out of town before Hurricane Katrina hit. We need to be rescued. We need the Red Cross. That is, we must come to that cross reddened by the blood of Christ shed for you and for me. At the time of the Great Flood all people were left to drown. We live at the time of the Lifting Up of Jesus and our Lord wants to throw ropes out to every one. As Paul says, our God "*wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth*" (1 Tim 2:4).

It is God himself who gives his only Son to die for us. Why such a horrific solution? The historical books of Exodus, Numbers, Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and the tirades of the prophets expose the idolatrous nature of our hearts, as illustrated by the people of Israel. We deceive ourselves into thinking we can live without God or, at least, live without giving him much attention. In the garden Adam and Eve refused to accept that God alone, as Creator, should decide what is good and what is evil. Like Adam and Eve we insist on our right to work this out for ourselves. *You may have heard the quip: What do you call a lawyer gone bad? Answer: Your honour.* We have gone bad and made ourselves into judges. We have honoured ourselves. Linking us with the Fall Paul says, "*They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator - who is forever praised. Amen*" (Rom 1:25). God gave Israel his standards of good and evil in the law of Moses revealed at Mount Sinai. But the Israelites did not know what was good for them and remind us how we all reject doing what God tells us to do.

In the Old Testament God starts with Abraham and the nation of Israel as he proceeds to create a new humanity, a royal and priestly people who live in his presence. Because sin excludes people from God's presence God instituted a system of sacrifices and provided Israel with a mediator, Moses, to ensure that his presence could be with his people wherever they went. However, the emphasis is still on distance since only the high priest could enter the holy of holies, the innermost area of the tabernacle and later temple. There is a veil closing off the holy of holies and curtains around the tabernacle itself. But when Jesus died there was an earthquake and that veil was split in two, symbolizing that the old dispensation is over. Now all of God's people have confidence to enter the throne room of God and stand in his presence. Why? Because Jesus' death deals with our sins once and for all.

We must not limit the relevance of Christ's death to our own individual and corporate freedom from sin and hope of glory. We must not limit it to a spiritual level of existence which has no relevance to the real world in which we live. You've seen the magnificent landscapes of Ken Duncan where his camera captures an immense view stretching from left to right. The Bible captures not just the length and breadth but also the height and depth. In Colossians 1:19-20 Paul reminds us: "*God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*" It is not just our lives that need to be put right. We do not appreciate the enormity of our own sinfulness. It's not just a case of what it does to you and me personally. Our sin has fundamentally damaged the entire universe, including both the visible heavens, outer space, and the invisible heavens, undiscoverable by Russian cosmonauts, in which God and his myriads of angels dwell. Everything is out of kilter and only the death of Christ is able to begin that process by which everything is put right.

It should be immediately apparent from this that social idealism has no place in biblical thought. Around 1516 Thomas More wrote a book he named *Utopia*. Today when people use this word they are referring to the perfect society, at least in their imaginations. However, Thomas More deliberately chose an ambiguous title which involved a play on two very similar Greek words. *Eutopia* means "good place"; but *outopia* means "no place". In other words, Thomas More imagined a good place which is really no place. He recognised it does not exist and believed it never would. The Bible makes it clear that people are incapable of creating the perfect society, of creating Utopia. But it insists that when Jesus returns there will be a perfect society, life in the new Jerusalem.

Yes, in the New Jerusalem there is no sea, that is, no chaos, and Jesus' miracles do point ahead to a world under his rule from which is eradicated all the chaos of demon possession, disease and natural catastrophes like the tsunamis and Hurricane Katrina. But at the same time the immense compassion of Christ was expressed in his healing miracles. If we adopt the extreme viewpoint that it is a waste of time to try to effect social change and work for social justice we are not merely failing to be Christlike. We are also failing to take Jesus' death and resurrection seriously. Jesus rose from the dead and he rules right now as the one to whom has been given all authority in heaven and on earth. The Lord cares for people, not just Christians, and so we are commanded to do good to all people. It is the Lord who has set governing authorities over us and we know, as the Proverb tells us, that the king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord and he turns it where he will. So we do what we can to improve the world around us, though never attaching to this the same absolute importance we give to communicating the gospel to people. We know that Jesus will return soon and when he does this world as we know it will burn, as Peter tells us. So we get our priorities sorted out. We put first things first and store up our treasures in heaven not on earth, devoting our lives to those things which will last forever.

By the way, city life is the ultimate life. That should get some reaction. Some of you may well respond. "I don't want to live in any city. For me the idyllic life is to go and live somewhere in the country, away from the rat race and smog and the threat of terrorist attacks. Somewhere where the air is fresh and clean and at night you can look up and see all the stars in the night sky; somewhere where you can enjoy God's creation." But when you think of the new Jerusalem don't think about London, Paris, New York, Bangkok or Hong Kong. This is a city in which you can have the best of both worlds, indeed of all worlds: an unspeakably beautiful city in which there is no smog. A city in which there is no terrorism, no red light district, no car theft, no car-jackings and child-molesters and no rat race. In Revelation 21:27 we are told: *"Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life"*.

City life. Yes, life is to be found in this city. In Revelation 22:1-2 we read: *"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month."* Life flows through this city. You eat life in this city. You will never feel that life in this city is getting stale; that it is time for a change. You will never have felt more alive. You will never be able to get enough of this life.

You can't decide you want to live in the new Jerusalem and then go and buy a house there for yourself. You can't just buy a plane ticket and fly there without a valid passport and you certainly can't live there unless you have citizenship papers. No! Only those people live in the new Jerusalem whom the ruler of the city has marked down in his book.

Is your name in the Lamb's book of life? Jesus once told his disciples, *"You did not choose me, but I chose you."* Paul tells us, *"For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."* A Christian woman told me why she left her church. Her minister preached a sermon on predestination. She said, "This is unfair" and in anger decided to leave her Bible-believing church and attend a well-known prosperity gospel charismatic church. But the Bible makes it repeatedly clear that unless God takes the initiative then a person has no hope.

In the Bible God reveals himself to be the God of sovereign grace - he chooses people. For example, God chose Abraham. A couple of years ago I sat with a group of Jewish acolytes who were being given what the rabbi called both a Torah study and a Bible study. The rabbi asked, "Why did God choose Abraham?" We were told how the rabbis had concocted a story to explain this - how Abraham smashed up the idols in his father's idol-making workshop and led his father to recognise God as the only true God. The rabbis have added to the word of God, something John also warns against at the Bible's close. They have replaced the God of undeserved sovereign grace with a God of reward, a God whose favour must be deserved. Paul takes us beyond Abraham and speaks about God's choice between his son Isaac's twin boys, Isaac and Esau. Here is what Paul teaches us, *"Yet before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad - in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls - she was told, 'The older will serve the younger.' Just as it is written: 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.' What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy"* (Rom 9:11-16).

This has immense practical relevance to us. Since we know God is love and does not desire any to perish, we are encouraged to press on in our attempts to win people for Christ. Remember when Paul was in Corinth and God assured him, *"I am with you and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city."* For this reason Paul stayed 18 months in Corinth, teaching them the word of God. It is important for us to realize that God has many people in this broad geographical area served by our church. That is, there are those God has chosen to come to himself and, by the way, they are not all Anglo-Celtic.

So we pray for people, we do all we can as a church to reach out into our community, because there is no greater joy than to be used by the Lord in bringing people to a knowledge of himself. Jesus said, *"But 1, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself"*. The consummation of all this is caught in the lens of the apostle John's eyes. In Revelation 7:9 he tells us, *"After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb."* This church is called to engage in ministry to the nations, both through overseas missionaries and through outreach into the suburbs around our church, doing what we can to contribute to the improvement of society, but especially communicating Christ as Lord. As we do so pray that they people will see Jesus lifted up and that we will see many, many people from all cultural and ethnic backgrounds drawn to Christ.