

## **“What is heaven?” a sermon preached at Knox Church Dunedin at the Sunday evening service, 27 September 2015, by Kerry Enright.**

Last Sunday night, we had the privilege of hearing Tom McLeish. In the course of his talk, he spoke about how, putting it simply – and I think this is what he said - heaven comes to us; we do not go to heaven.

Afterwards someone asked me about that. And tonight I want to begin to address it. I say begin, because although every sermon is a work in progress, this sermon fits that category more than most. The subject is so big, there is more to be said than possible in a short sermon.

Tom was referring to a consistent strand in the Bible, that the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God, or the rule or realm or reign of God, breaks in on our world. The gospels claim it happened in Jesus.

Near the beginning of Mark’s gospel:

“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.”

Matthew was writing for a Jewish community so he does not speak of the kingdom of God; he speaks of the kingdom of heaven.

The gospel writers are saying that in Jesus heaven comes close, that the way Jesus lived embodied heaven, that we are invited to enter that realm, that way of being, where the power of this world is replaced by the power of God, the way of the Empire is replaced with way of Jesus Christ, love and justice for the oppressed.

Tom referred to the book of Revelation.

Again, there is a passage that speaks of the coming of a new heaven and a new earth. Chapter 21 –

‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ... and I saw the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.’

Again, the idea that heaven comes to us, comes down to us.

So Jesus takes hold of us. And as the Holy Spirit takes hold of our lives, we are ushered into a new way of being, we are drawn into heaven, tasting it now, waiting for its fulfilment at the end of time.

This being taken by Christ is like rebirth, being born from above. Again, the metaphor is spatial – heaven, up there, transcendent, not earth-bound, not flat

earth, but drawing us in. It's describing something beyond us, something beyond our present experience, something more than what we presently know.

We celebrated that reality this morning in the sacrament of baptism.

Lydia was entering into the dynamic of dying to sin and rising to new life.

At funerals for people who have been baptised, you will hear me read from Colossians ...

“You were buried with Christ in baptism, and in that baptism you were raised with him. And although you were dead because of your sins, God has brought you to life with Christ.”

Then I will read from Romans - “there is nothing in death or life, in the world as it is, or the world as it shall be, nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Baptism marks our entry to heaven, our being with Jesus Christ. In baptism we celebrate passing from death to eternal life, to what David Read called life-plus, abundant life, overflowing life, life for others, life in Jesus Christ. NT Wright says, “heaven is regularly not a future destiny, but the other, hidden dimension of our ordinary life, God's dimension if you like.”

John de Gruchy is one of the great Reformed theologians of our time, a leader in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. Steve de Gruchy, the son of John and Isobel, at the age of 48 was tragically killed in a white water rafting accident. John has written a book called *Led into mystery* (SCM Press 2013 London) in which he seeks to reflect on his son's death.

De Gruchy – “In other words, “heaven” is not a place you go to when you die if you have faith or are good; it is the realm of God's eternal and just reign redemptively breaking into our time and space. The kingdom of heaven is not a distant star or planet beyond the clouds, but the transforming presence of God at work in our midst.”

So when we die, we do not go to heaven. Heaven has come to us, drawn us into its realm, and death does not diminish that reality.

Nothing can take eternal life from us.

Now I want to be careful and gentle in what I say because I know people hold cherished and comforting views about heaven. I do not wish in any way to diminish the sense of closeness to those who have died and the sense they are held by God.

I almost invariably hear at a funeral someone say ... well, they have gone to be with mum or dad or someone else. Or they have gone to a better place.

With some trepidation I say, gently, I think it is quite hard to find a biblical basis for that thought.

The idea of “life after death” may not always be a helpful way of describing the resurrected life.

NT Wright says resurrection is not about life after death but about life after life after death. He is referring to life after death as what happens when one is born from above, and what happens then after that life.

This way of speaking is trying to overcome the idea of some continuation of this life as we know it.

It is, says Nicholas Lash, misleading to speak of resurrection as another state of affairs, or event, subsequent to death or of risen life as a prolongation of temporal existence (referred to in de Gruchy).

Resurrection occurs in the midst of death, because life itself is a process of dying. They are not, says Lash, two processes that succeed one another. They are occurring concurrently. Throughout our lives, we are living and dying, and resurrection engages both those realities in our lives now.

Albert Nolan – “Death is a part of life. My death is part of who I am and what I am. To forget this is to live in some kind of dream world ... when we embrace our uniqueness, we embrace, among other things, our death. For you and me today, embracing death is the great adventure of learning to love ourselves as we are: one, undivided, and unique.” (quoted from de Gruchy)

John de Gruchy says reverent silence is often the best response to questions about what happens beyond death.

De Gruchy explores what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, when Paul speaks of the resurrected body. The idea of a resurrected body suggests there is continuity of identity, of personhood. An analogy might be an acorn and oak tree which have the same DNA.

De Gruchy notes that modern genetics provides some analogies.

“Any cell, no matter how minute or insignificant in our bodies, contains all the information required to assemble an entire individual human being.”

So, he says, what is known by God in this life, is known by God, the God who is beyond limit, beyond death, beyond imagining. We are known and held, we are remembered, in the deepest sense by God, in Christ and death does not diminish that holding.

In Christ means as part of the body of Christ. God always sees us in relationship. So what is known and held is “us in relationship”. The concept of individual personalities as we have come to understand them, was not the backdrop of the early Christian movement. They had a much more corporate or communal or relationship understanding of us as people. We were never other than people in relationship. Being in Christ, being in the risen body of Christ, the Church. God holds us in the body of Christ, the body into which we are baptised,.

Nothing can take that from us. Death is in no way the diminishing of this eternal life, this life with Christ, this life in the body.