

Eternity in their Hearts II

Arklow 14th April 2013

We started to look at the topic of eternity last week, beginning not with the book of Revelation but with the statement in one of the ‘Wisdom’ or ‘Poetry’ books of the Old Testament. In it we overhear the philosopher, possibly Solomon, trying to grasp understanding from the life he sees around him, says that

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.”

Ecclesiastes 3:11 NIV

Later in the chapter the writer adds:

“Who knows if the spirit of people rises upward and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth? I have seen that there is nothing better than for a person to enjoy his activities because that is his reward. For who can enable him to see what will happen after he dies?”

Ecclesiastes 3:21-22 HCSB

This is surely one of the most crucial questions in the Bible, and in our hearts. Who knows? Who can enable us to see? This is a tormenting question when faced with bereavement, or our own mortality, or simply the suffering and seeming injustice of the world around us.

Still in the ‘wisdom literature,’ we meet the character of Job. He was a man gazing down the barrel of all of these trials. He’d lost his family (bereavement), his health (mortality) and his wealth (injustice). He ended up sitting on the rubbish heap scratching his sores with his wife telling him to curse God and die and his friends giving pious but useless advice. Even in the middle of his suffering, without clear reference to most of the teaching of the rest of the OT, Job made this astonishing statement:

“But I know my living Redeemer, and He will stand on the dust at last. Even after my skin has been destroyed, yet I will see God in my flesh. I will see Him myself; my eyes will look at Him and not a stranger. My heart longs within me.

“If you say, ‘How will we pursue him, since the root of the problem lies with him?’ then be afraid of the sword, because wrath brings punishment by the sword, so that you may know there is a judgement.”

Job 19:25-29 HCSB

Job expresses a clear hope that even in the ‘dust’ – a clear reference to the curse of death spoken over sinful Adam – even when his body has been destroyed, he will look at his Redeemer, and recognise Him and be recognised. And if you have a problem with that, watch out, because there is such a thing as wrath and a judgement.

And in the middle of that is the expression of the fact we began with last week that God has ‘set eternity in their hearts, but man cannot discover the work God has done from beginning to end.’ In Job’s words: *“My heart longs within me.”*

There is a yearning for God, for truth, for justice, for wholeness. And the implication of these verses, with no reference to Abraham or Moses or David or the prophets or any of the other building-blocks of the Old Testament Scriptures, is that this yearning will be met in a place beyond the ‘dust’ of the grave, it will be fulfilled in the face to face encounter with the living Redeemer, our God.

But I can't believe that, can I? Everything around me – the education system, the media, my experience, the way people talk to each other about life and death – screams YOLO (You Only Live Once). Therefore, enjoy what you can now, because you're a long time dead. **Who can enable us to see what happens after we die?** Can we ask some of the people who have died and been revived? Without going to the many 'near death experiences' of modern times, we have a number of 'nearer than near' instances in the Bible. The prophet Elisha raised the son of a couple in Shunem. Jesus raised a widow's son in Nain, and a little girl, and Lazarus. Peter raised Dorcas, Paul raised Eutychus. Can they enable us to see what happens? No – not a word is recorded of what they said about dying or what may lie beyond it. They can't enable us to see.

Only one person can: the one who was not just revived or resuscitated but *resurrected*. The question in our hearts is answered by the question of the angels at Jesus' tomb on Easter morning: "Why are you looking for the living among the dead?" "He is not here, but He has been resurrected!" (Luke 24:5-6)

And so what does that mean for us?

As we began to see last week in 1 CO 15, it means there is hope for all of us. In fact, it goes as far as saying that without this hope any claim to be believers or followers of Jesus is utterly meaningless. Without the resurrection there is no Christianity, because we don't follow the teachings of Jesus or his moral example. We do what he called Peter and Philip and James and Nathanael to do – follow *Him*. In fact, we don't even just follow him, but we are united with Him.

"Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

"If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection."

Romans 6:3-5 (In midst of an explanation of the defeat of sin in our lives and our freedom to live away from its bondage)

"Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him."

Romans 6:8-9

Come spring, gardeners and farmers sow seeds. Little, dried-up remnants of last year's flowers or fruit. They go into the ground and get covered over and, given the right conditions, begin to germinate and send up new shoots. Those little dried-up brown or black dots send up new, bright green life. It's an amazing process. But it doesn't stop there. Those new shoots send up flower stems and buds and what was one seed has the ability to produce many more, in some cases hundreds and hundreds. In the calendar of the people of Israel, this process got celebrated twice a year. When the first shoots came up and began to produce the flowers that would become this year's crop, they picked the first one and gave thanks for what it represented at the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost. What they brought in was the 'firstfruit' in the knowledge that it showed that much more fruit was on the way, the full harvest, which was celebrated at the Festival of Ingathering at the end of summer.

1 CO 15:20 describes Jesus as the '*firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*'

Because Jesus was raised it means that it's possible to raise up what's been laid down, that even though our bodies give way and go to the ground, we have hope like Job to see God, not just in some disembodied 'spiritual plane' but in our flesh. Jesus was raised body, soul and spirit. Yet his resurrection body was different. It was recognisably Him, showing a continuity with the life he led before the Cross, but it had new abilities, to appear and disappear in different places, and even to be raised up into heaven.

1 CO 15:42-44 is a great hymn to the truth of this 'better resurrection' to come.

"So it will be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power, it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body."

Look at those contrasts:

Perishable – imperishable

Dishonoured – Glorious

Weak – powerful

Natural – Spiritual

(Later: Mortal – Immortal 15:53)

Jesus, the firstfruit, is the sign that there is a much greater harvest to be gathered out of the graves of the world. Because he rose, we can be assured that there is a resurrection for all of us. Just as surely as we all die because of the act of sin and the sinfulness handed down from our earthly predecessor, Adam, so because of Christ, the last Adam (15:45), everyone will be burst free from that bond of death, because we were all included in His sacrificial death on the cross. He took each one of us into himself and said to the Father: "There, XXs sins and sinfulness are paid for. Their punishment is complete. The blood is poured out on the altar. It is finished." And because He is sinless, perfect, incorruptible, his grave was only a temporary home. He is not there, he has been resurrected. And everyone who was included in His death is included in His rising.

Have you? Have you been included into this death and rising of our Saviour Jesus Christ? Not have you heard about it, read about it, sung about it, but have you accepted deep within that Jesus included you in his death, and therefore in his rising. That on Good Friday your broken, sinful, separated-from-God self was crucified in the physical body of Jesus of Nazareth. Executed. Finished. And on Easter morning your healed, whole, righteous, united-with-Christ self walked out of the tomb and with a smile waited for the world to come and find that everything had changed, that the green shoots had come up out of the ground and produced the first fruits, the promise of a mighty harvest.

Have you ever explained this to anyone else? Have you asked what they believe about life and death and heard all the vague notions about coming back in another life or as a butterfly or some kind of spirit? Or simply going to nothingness? What then, will they do with the raising of Jesus? Why did he die and rise if not for this? What does it mean otherwise?

These aren't always easy or comfortable conversations, and they need all the love, sensitivity and discernment that the Holy Spirit can release in us, but they don't have to be contentious or judgemental. In fact, there is no place for a Christian to judge anyone. It's nothing to do with 'Are you one of us?' and everything to do with 'Are you in Him? Do you have the hope of heaven and a life that is rescued from the

corruption of body, soul and spirit that sin and rebellion inevitably bring to each one of us?’

Because there needs to be a separation, a dividing between what is life and what brings death. We so often think of the Cross as the bridge between heaven and earth, and it is, but it is also the surgeon’s table where everything that steals, kills and destroys the good life that God created for the world is cut out and the life in all its fullness is transfused into the patient.

Jesus is the firstfruit, the pointer to the great harvest of everyone who will be raised in Him on the last day, but He’s also the one holding the sword that Job spoke about way, way back. There is a cutting between life and death, sin and righteousness, good and evil. And we’ll look at that in more depth next week.

Who can enable us to see what will happen? The only one who’s truly been there and is alive forevermore. That means today. Now. He’s here by his Holy Spirit.