

WHAT HOPE IS THERE FOR MISSION?

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The humour of this kind of “end of the world” cartoon reminds us that there is a certain disdain for crazy preachers who proclaim the end of all things, but we ought to remember that Jesus came into Galilee as an end-time preacher, saying, "The time has come, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" (Mark 1:14-15). It might be good if the church was more willing to sound equally crazy in saying that the kingdom of God is a lot closer than many realize, and that we are nearly there at every moment of time! The Celtic Christian tradition has a saying that heaven and earth are only three feet apart, and that in the “thin” places the distance is even less. This is a way of saying that there are times and places when it seems that the veil between heaven and earth is lifted and we are able to get a glimpse, a sense of the holy.

The “thin places” can be found everywhere, in conversation, in prayer, in the classroom, in worship, in the street. This is partly because the idea of the “end” of the world has two distinct meanings. It can refer to the *temporal* end, the time when it finishes; and it can refer to its *meaning or purpose*. From a biblical, or eschatological point of view these two

dimensions of “the end” are connected because the meaning of all events is to be discerned from examining those events which occur at “the end times”.

And God, by grace, has helped us in this by locating the resurrection of Jesus Christ, an event which, theologically, belongs to the end of time, in the midst of time. An analogy of this is that although the “end” (the purpose or meaning) of this talk really belongs at its “end” (the temporal “end”) I can actually anticipate this and bring the future into the present and say:

The mission of the church (participating in the mission of God) is to help people understand that the purpose of life can be found, and experienced right *now* as well as in the *future*, in what God has done through the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus *individually* in the eternal life we can experience now; and *corporately* in the life of the kingdom of God in which we share; and *cosmically* in the redemption of the whole of creation.

This means that the church’s mission is to bring the future into the present. There is a joke about a man trying to explain complicated directions to a disorientated tourist who finishes up saying, "Well, if I were you I wouldn’t start from here"! But, in terms of finding one’s way to the kingdom of God, you can start from *anywhere*! God is gracious, if you want to start with him, he simply does not mind about time or place.

The scientific story and simple future hope

Christian mission can be conceived as the attempt to bring together the two different sorts of “ends” – the temporal with the eternal. These different “ends” belong to different stories but, as we shall see, they can become a single story. The first of these stories is generally known today as a scientific story where the journey to the end of the world began, as best can be established, about 13.7 billion years ago with the Big Bang. The universe has been expanding ever since, creating galaxies, stars and planets and then, out of a mixture of chemicals amino acids, proteins, more complex molecules and life. Somewhere between 7 and 100 million species of living things! And there is no guarantee that the human species will last forever. Human life is under threat because the sun will eventually expand and burn up the earth and everything on it. But most of us don’t worry about it because it won’t happen for another 7 billion years or so. And ultimately there is no hope for the universe as a whole. If gravitational forces are strong enough then one day the universe will stop expanding and will contract and, eventually, all matter will collapse into black holes and a Big Crunch. But if, as scientists currently expect, the gravitational forces do not overcome the expansionary forces of the universe then the expansion will continue with the universe behaving like the coals of a camp-fire that have been scattered, gradually getting cooler until, eventually, it becomes too cold to sustain life. A Big Freeze. Neither picture is very inviting.

But, as I am sure you understand, most people are not worried about whether the earth will burn to a crisp in 7 billion years but they do care if rains tomorrow, and they do care about whether they get that pay rise they’ve been waiting for, whether they will lose their job in the re-structure, and that there is a cure for cancer soon, and whether that their kids will turn out OK. This is what we might call, simple hope, that the future will be good and satisfying. This is a hope for the kind of future which emerges out of the present. And it is vital for life. Our lives need hope as much as our bodies need oxygen. And if we don’t have it life is not worth living.

A friend of ours who had lived for many years in a refugee camp on the Thai-Burma border showed us slides of the camp with raw sewerage streaming down between the houses. “It

didn't used to be like that", he told us, there used to be proper drains but people have been there so long now that they have no hope for the future and so they cannot be bothered about the present. And there are refugees who had been waiting for years and even decades for the opportunity of relocating to another country who, when the opportunity finally arose, said that they didn't want to go. After years of disappointment and failed hopes they have simply run out of the spiritual and emotional energy needed to establish themselves in a new country and they are saying, "Well, maybe it is just meant that we stay here, perhaps that is just our life." They have no hope, he said, and so life is pointless, and action to change it is useless and futile.

It is the role of Christian missionaries, and I include all Christians in that category, to bring simple, immediate hope into the world, into situations like that and to make a connection with the bigger, broader, transcendent hope which expects that God will do something completely new and different, something that is completely unexpected and unpredictable.

It has to be both because there are deep connections between them. It is wrong to point people to the future hope of eternal life in Christ; or the hope of the community of the kingdom of God; or to the final New Creation without seeing the implications for the present situation. And it is equally wrong to work towards a better future within the immediate situation without also pointing people to the transcendent hope which does not just emerge out of the activities of the present.

The Biblical story and transcendent future hope

Within the whole biblical story there are two events which point to this connection. Firstly, *the incarnation* tells us of *the eternal coming into the temporal* and the physical. It says that God is so concerned about this world that God came into it and participated in it as the God-man. And secondly, the bodily resurrection tells us about *the temporal and the physical going into the eternal*. The resurrection of the whole of the person of Jesus tells us that God did not create this world (bodies, and all other physical and temporal things) and then intend just to throw it away and start again. No, it is precisely *this* world which is transformed, and the resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of it.

There are those who believe in a real and genuine resurrection of Jesus who believe that the tomb was not empty and that his bones and body remained here and that the resurrection was some super-spiritual event. I think that is a most unfortunate error for it implies that God does not really want *this* world, this life. It devalues all that is taking place here and it creates a complete dualism of body and soul which is unhelpful. The New Testament speaks of a direct *continuity* between the persons and the physicality of this world and the next. The apostle Paul's preferred analogy was of a seed and a plant but mine is the connection between a piece of wood which is then burnt and becomes heat energy. A piece of wood and heat energy exist in very different ways, but there is a continuity between them, just as there is a continuity between me as I am now (and that includes the physical dimension of my life) and me as a resurrected person.

The connection between the eternal and the temporal which the incarnation and the resurrection guarantee provides hope in both this world and the next and makes a connection between them which should be expressed in the form of the church's mission.

Difficulties with eschatology in the modern context

Dealing with these eschatological concepts is difficult, for a number of reasons. Firstly, because whereas a Christian understanding of hope was once part of the fabric of western society (vividly portrayed, for example, in art and literature) there has, in the modern era been a sharp cultural decline in the knowledge of these events. Modern and post-modern western people typically have very little idea of what the Christian story is, and simply do not think in anything like these categories.

Secondly, while it would be wrong to say that despair and hopelessness pervades our culture, there is certainly an air of despair – or hopelessness – which assumes that there isn't anything other than this world. This is compellingly portrayed in “Waiting for Godot” by Samuel Beckett, which, as I am sure many know, had a recent run here in Melbourne with Ian McKellen and Roger Rees playing Vladimir and Estragon, two tramps who are waiting for the mysterious Godot about whom they know very little and who never comes. Beckett would not commit himself to say that the play was about a society that has lost faith waiting for a God who never comes thus leaving the tramps, indeed society, perpetually and pointlessly bickering and debating and waiting without any real hope. But that is what it seems to portray to many people. It has two acts and was described rather cuttingly as a play in which nothing happens, twice. The 20th century's most significant English language play, is, in the real sense, absolutely hope-less.

Thirdly, there is an ambiguity in Christian scholarship about eschatological themes. Not only does the church have to face the scepticism of the modern, scientific world but it also has to deal with a long history of ambiguity and uncertainty among Christians about the interpretation of Biblical eschatology. On the one hand it has to be said that biblical scholarship has been responsible for re-focusing on the importance of eschatology as the medium in which the biblical narrative is conducted. That has been very positive, not least because it puts the focus on the person of Jesus, but, on the other hand it has produced serious interpretive difficulties. While modern, scientific culture has *some* difficulty engaging with miraculous elements of the apparently historical gospel narratives it has *profound* difficulty with eschatological concepts typically expressed in terms of visions, dreams, strange portents in the sky, angels, symbolic cities, mythical animals, whores and beasts with seven heads, dragons and lambs and global battles between good and evil. Debates between scientism, literalism, de-mythologization and historicism have left many (at least in the mainstream protestantism that I am describing here) either confused or preferring to leave it all aside. And even if one finds a satisfactory way of dealing with the apocalyptic literature, many still have significant problems with related concepts such as resurrection, judgment, heaven and hell.

My local church is like many others that follow the Christian year. It begins with Advent, moves on to Christmas, usually loses Epiphany in the January holidays, but celebrates Lent and Easter and so forth. Advent is the *season of hope* because it looks forward to the coming of Christ which lies at the heart of all Christian expectation. And, traditionally, there is a connection between the coming of Christ in terms of the incarnation celebrated at Christmas, and the second coming of Christ to reign over all. Consequently, the four Sundays of advent prior to Christmas have traditionally celebrated four great elements of Christian hope: heaven, hell, death and judgment. It was usual to have readings focused on these and for the preacher to address them in his or her teaching. But for many modern churches that is often a bit too much. This is evidenced by the fact that whenever I mention this there is usually (as now) some quiet laughter from those who immediately recognize the improbability of this

happening in their own church. And so when it comes to the time to progressively light four candles made into an Advent wreath there is a tendency to focus on four different themes like love, joy, peace and hope, which are much more acceptable when stripped of the more exotic eschatological imagery. All of this has the unfortunate effect of diminishing the hope-full dimension of the church's mission.

The problem is also seen if you ask people to define the church. The answer will come in different ways but I would suggest that, typically, the popular mainline protestant perception of the church is far too limited, too small. The church is commonly seen as "the community of believers" or "a gathering of the people of God" or "a congregation of saints". That is, the focus falls upon the gathered people of God which is, in itself, good and correct, but without an obvious reference to the ultimate Christian hope it becomes too present-orientated, lacking a genuinely eschatological dimension. The Biblical images used in such a definition such as "the people of God", or "the body of Christ" do, in biblical usage, have an eschatological dimension, but this is usually neglected and thus one typically ends up with a view of the mission of the church which is very present-orientated and not hope-full enough.

The problem is accentuated by the very common tendency for Christians to think about the church *sociologically* rather than *theologically*. In sociological terms the world or the culture is the broader concept and the church, a typical voluntary association, is one component part of it. But *theologically*, the church as the body of Christ is the greater, broader concept, it is the future and the destiny of all things and the world was created so that there might be a church, a community worshipping God, a body of Christ. The church, as the body of Christ, is the primary category and it is nothing less than the future of the world.

The church needs an understanding of *mission* which is clearly expressed in terms of eschatological hope, to the effect that mission is the present, proleptic anticipation of what God is going to do, which, as we shall see, is nothing less than the incorporation of all things in the Trinitarian life of God. The church's mission is to do nothing less than share in, and to help others to share in the life of God.

There are individual, communal and cosmic dimensions of the church's mission

It should be clear by now that not only are *mission* and *hope* intimately connected but also that it is necessary to connect hope very clearly with our understanding of *God*. In fact, many debates about mission are really debates about God. The way that we understand God as Trinity affects our understanding of hope which affects our understanding of mission. Our model of God really controls everything.

Christian hope can be seen as focusing on three related dimensions of life: the *personal*, the *communal* and the *cosmic*. These are found in three broad sets of biblical images relating to eternal life, the Kingdom of God and the New Creation. One's emphasis on these will largely determine whether there is an emphasis on mission is seen as evangelism, or as social action or as worship or all three correlated in some way. I suggest that in our present western context it is the last of these (the cosmic) which is more neglected and in need of renewal. It is this which is most focused upon the action of God (rather than our own efforts), and which is broader and more all embracing. It is also the most hope-full.

The relationship between these which will be expounded in the following material is summarized in the associated table.

Aspects of life	The focus of the hope of salvation	The Trinity	The Trinity understood as -	Central concepts concerning Trinitarian relations	Mission understood as -	Attitude
Personal	Eternal Life	Reveals God's <i>plan</i> of salvation	"Economic" - describing the specific work of Father, Son and Spirit	<i>Homoousios</i> (Jesus is "of the same substance" as the Father)	Individual Evangelism Word Conversion	Faith
Social	Kingdom of God	Is a <i>paradigm</i> for community life	"Essential" - Describing the inner-life community relationships of the Trinity	<i>Perichoresis</i> (Father, Son and Spirit live in community in one another)	Community Peace/justice Model; action, transformation	Love
Cosmic	New Creation	Involves <i>participation</i> in the life of God	"Consummate" – describing the "future of God" whereby all things are in Christ	<i>Anakephalaiōsasthai</i> (all things gathered together under one head) <i>Theias koinōnoi phuseōs</i> (We become "participants of the divine nature")	Cosmic Doxology Worship; ecological care,	Hope

It is possible to see all three dimensions of hope in the first chapter of Ephesians. Firstly, Paul speaks of the redemption of *individual* believers, pointing out that God "chose us in him (Christ) before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ...In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins"(Eph 1:4-5). Other parts of the New Testament use similar language to express the personal dimension of hope including the language of conversion, reconciliation, justification and eternal life. Secondly, Paul shows that this salvation is also about *community* and participating in the body of Christ, who is the head of

the church (Eph 1:22). He also speaks about “redemption (not as individuals but) as God’s own people“ (Eph 1:14). Other parts of the New Testament express the same general point with different imagery: the language of kingdom, a people, an army, or a flock. Thirdly, Paul’s Trinitarian teaching reveals to us the true nature and the future of the *cosmos*, indeed, the whole structure and purpose of creation. Paul says, “He made known to us the mystery of his will...to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.” (Eph 1:10). The language is of cosmos, a new creation of all things, the redemption of creation.

The various expressions of the work of salvation (individual, communal and cosmic) each have their own emphases. Perhaps the central focus of this cosmic teaching about salvation is that this new creation is nowhere other than “in” God. Paul describes the mystery which is revealed as *anakephalaiōsis*: “to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ”. It has the sense of “bringing things together” so that it can be translated “that he might gather together in one all things in Christ” or “to unite all things in him”. The only other New Testament occurrence of this word is in Romans 13:9 where Paul says that all the commandments of the law “are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbour as yourself”. In other words all the myriad laws, principles and commandments of the Old Testament are *summed up* in one single command. And here the meaning is that all of God’s purposes, plans and actions throughout the universe are *summed up* in the person of Jesus Christ, the focal point of the whole of creation.

To be a part of the body of Christ means to share in this future of which the church is an anticipation. The church is not merely a gathering of people, it is where *Christ* lives with his people, and is a part of the future. Christian hope is not just God *giving us something*; Christian hope is not just God *being with us*; but Christian hope is God *sharing the divine life* with us.

Another expression of this is found in 2 Peter 1: 4: which says that our hope is that we will *participate in the divine nature*. We will never be God but this is a remarkably strong way of saying that we will share in God’s life and there is absolutely *no human analogy for this*. I can know someone else really well but I can never actually be “in” them. But Christ is in us, and we are in Christ and we will share in God’s future life one day. It is extraordinary. This sort of language is used metaphorically by all sorts of groups like Rotary or Scouts who speak of a global “body” of members. But for Christians this is not a metaphor but an expression of a reality. In the consummation of all things we will experience this fully – life in God.

We can think of *God being for us* – which is good, and we might say that this is part of the message of the Old Testament. But since the incarnation it is possible to say more, because we can also say truly that *God is with us*. But then again there is, with Christian hope, even more than that because we can also say that God did all this so that *God might actually be in us* – or, to put it another way, and more accurately, *that we might be in God*. This is best of all and it is the hope which we have. It has a present realization through the Holy Spirit, but we await the final consummation when all things will be found in God. This is the future of the world.

The relationship of hope to Trinity

At this point I want to relate this discussion of hope, church and mission to discussions that take place within systematic theology about the nature of God as Trinity, and I want to suggest that the typical discussion needs to be extended further.

Firstly, theology has spoken extensively of “*the economic Trinity*” which is an understanding of the way God works in the world as Father, Son and Spirit in order to bring salvation. The Father sends the Son, the Son ministers, suffers and dies and is raised, and the Spirit applies to the believer the power and presence of God. This is the work of salvation traditionally understood. In terms of developing this understanding the central historical debate concerned the person of Jesus. If Christ is to bring salvation it seemed he must be both *God* and *man* – but this was problematic for many. The debate swung around this word *homoousios*: can we say Jesus is “of the same substance” as the Father – and thus truly God? The answer was “Yes, not only can we, but we must”. In this case mission is all about bringing salvation; eternal life. It is about conversion and in this regard, faith is critical. This understanding of salvation stresses the fact that believers are raised in Christ, and it provides an assurance because this is a work done by Christ. But it also provides us with a challenge and a mission. The challenge is that the resurrection does not wipe out one’s personality or character – it changes, enhances and refines it while, at the same time building on it. What God and I are doing together today is part of the process of recreation. As Oscar Wilde said, “every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character” and this is the character that God refines and transforms in the resurrection. The mission is to share with others the possibility of resurrection life in Christ.

Secondly, there is another dimension to the Trinity. Many writers have found it helpful to speak of “*the essential (or immanent) Trinity*” which is a way of referring to the inner life of God who lives uniquely and perfectly as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God has not merely *appeared* to us in a trinitarian fashion in order to save the world but God *actually* is trinitarian in essence. As this understanding of God is expounded it says a lot about life in community. The critical word in this discussion has been *perichoresis* or mutual in-dwelling which refers to the nature of the inner trinitarian relationships of Father, Son and Spirit. This understanding of Trinity can become a model or paradigm for the way that the church is to live and logically, therefore mission becomes a much more socially orientated activity in which peace and justice come to the fore. The church is a foretaste of God’s community. It is an eschatological community working for the good of society, ending poverty, doing justice and so forth.

Sometimes there have been discussions about whether mission is really evangelism or really social action. Is one more important, or prior to the other? The answer is that both of them are grounded in the nature of God as Trinity and one ought not choose just one dimension of mission any more than one should choose between economic and essential dimensions of the Trinity. The Micah Declaration on Integral Mission rightly says, “It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our *proclamation* has *social consequences* as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our *social involvement* has *evangelistic consequences* as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.”

The consummate Trinity

Keeping these dimensions together is good for both theology and mission, but there is a third, much-neglected dimension which needs to be incorporated which shifts the focus more towards what God has yet to do. It provides a stronger basis for hope in mission,

The concepts of the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity need to be related to what I refer to as "*the consummate Trinity*." This dimension, though not the term, is found in the writings of Karl Barth, Jurgen Moltmann, Catherine LaCugna, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Ted Peters and others but, it seems to me, while discussions of economic and essential understandings of the Trinity seem to be endless the implications of the consummate Trinity are more rarely addressed and have significantly less influence on the life and mission of the church. Perhaps because of the problems associated with eschatology discussed earlier. But this dimension is vital for at least four reasons. Firstly, this perspective stresses the utter *comprehensiveness* of what God is doing. The whole of life and creation is gathered up. The physical world, the cosmos, the deserts, the earth the stars: all things are taken up. Secondly, this perspective also stresses the *continuity* of the New Creation with the present world. The creation of a new heaven and a new earth does not mean the total abandonment of the old heaven and the old earth. God does not create in order to destroy. Thirdly, this cosmic perspective stresses the *transcendent* nature of hope. That this is not something we can do (nor can we really convert or create community!). We need to be reminded of the transcendent hope that does not emerge out of present; and of the fact that mission is the *mission of God* in which are able to participate. Finally, this cosmic dimension reminds us that the future is *in God*. When the end comes there is redemption, a new creation, a transformation and all goes into God. We should bear in mind that the future is not so much a *place as an existence in God*.

What, then, are our missionary responsibilities in this particular area? Firstly, we can care for this world as best we are able. Ecology is a part of our mission. Secondly, the immensity of the cosmic dimension and our smallness points out that there is a need for *God* to come in and transform and this calls us to praise and worship. It points us towards *worship, doxology as the focus of our mission* because it reminds us of the greatness of what is to be done and the fact that only God can do it.

To worship in this way is our mission. Indeed, to have the world worshipping God – that is the ultimate mission, the ultimate goal of all these other activities of evangelism and community building. Evangelism that does not lead people to an *on-going life of worship* within the church is not good evangelism; maybe it is not evangelism at all. And a mission which seeks peace and justice in this world which does not equally seek to bring about *the peace of God* (and not just the absence of war, discrimination and injustice) is not really mission either.

Conclusion

In the end, mission emerges out of hope that is connected to our understanding of the Trinitarian God. And the church's hope, and thus the church's mission should focus on all three dimensions of that hope, individual, communal and cosmic. Only because the church has a hope does it engage in mission. And anything that is done without hope is not a part of the mission of God.

The hope of mission points us towards those “end-time” events that really constitute a new beginning, the beginning of eternal life, the beginning of the kingdom of God and the beginning of the world to come. Consequently, I will finish with a few lines from T S Eliot’s “Four Quartets” – four poems that deal with our relationship with time and eternity. Time, says Eliot is a limit to our own transcendence, a limit which can only be overcome through Christ.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

* * *

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.