

Worship: Imagining our Future

Read Revelation 4:1-2, 6b-8, 21:1-5

1. John is caught up into heavenly worship to be shown “what must take place after this”. Revelation 21 gives us the culmination of God’s story, the future He is preparing for us. What is the nature of that future?

Heaven and earth coming together. Heaven descending to earth. The Living God dwelling with us surrounded by a renewed cosmos, a renewed human community.

What does heaven and earth coming together look like?

For the Jews the temple was where heaven and earth met. Jesus came into this worldview and said I am the temple, I am the place where heaven and earth meet. Throughout his life Jesus illustrated what heaven and earth looked like – the blind see, the lame walk, evil bound and cast out, the unclean cleansed and welcomed in, racial division healed as Jew and Samaritan worship together. All that Jesus did, all that he said, was pointing to what heaven and earth coming together would look like.

2. This picture of our future seems to conflict with how Christians normally envision our future as heaven, spending eternity in a spiritual ethereal existence in the presence of God. In the sermon Tim spoke of this as a temporary “rest place” or waiting place before the renewal of all things. Does this change your understanding of the biblical story? If so, how?

It might help here to note the connection Tim made in the sermon. On the cross in the conversation with one of the thieves, in light of his profession of faith, Jesus says today you will be with me in paradise. We often think that this means – “today you and I will be in heaven together”. But the word paradise meant rest place, a temporary place of rest along the way of a journey to another destination. How we envision heaven then is simply a temporary waiting place along the way to the coming together of heaven and earth.

3. Our worship is meant to “re story” us. James Smith says that every liturgy, every worship service has a “telos”, an end, a goal, a particular vision of flourishing that is loaded into its rituals, forming us into a people that desire and pursue that end. In the sermon Tim mentioned a number of our rituals that re story us toward that end. (Church architecture, day of worship, Kingdom oriented prayer, the sacrament, music – art – poetic liturgy activating our imagination) Which one stood out to you and why?

Here are some unedited selections from the sermon that might help to “jog” the memories of your group participants.

Some of you here come from orthodox traditions – where that orientation is built into the very architecture of the building – the worship space is divided by a screen – on one side of the screen is earth – where worshippers sit – on the other side is heaven – beautifully captured in artistic grandeur – the worshippers look through to the grandeur of heaven – from behind the screen the gospel book is brought out – the good news comes from heaven to earth – the sacraments are brought out – a foretaste of heaven brought to earth – all of worship then is anticipating God bringing together heaven and earth at last.

Now although that goal – that end is not explicit in the architecture of our space – it is loaded into other habits – other rituals – beginning with the very day we gather – a Sunday - not a Saturday – I think we get so used to worshipping on Sunday that we forget just how radical a change that was – for the biblical proscribed Sabbath was Saturday. Why did we move it?

We moved it because in Jesus' resurrection – he became the first born of a new creation – guaranteeing that future coming together of heaven and earth – guaranteeing Sabbath rest for the entire cosmos – early Christians then oriented their worship toward that future – each of our worship services then is to be a mini-easter – celebrating the reality that – as N.T. Wright puts it - God is going to do for the whole cosmos what he has did for Jesus at easter.

Such an orientation is loaded not only into the day we worship – it's loaded into how we worship – with the centrality of a particular prayer – the Lord's prayer.

You see when in the 16th c. Thomas Cranmer put together the Anglican book of common prayer – that guides us through many of our services at little T - as he moved into the Lord's prayer he used these words – And now as our Savior Christ has taught us we are bold to pray – we are bold to pray.

Indeed the prayer is bold from start to finish – it is bold for in light of Jesus' work we call upon a holy almighty God as father – it is bold - for all of the verbs in the prayer are in the imperative – they're not requests – they're commands – bring your kingdom – do your will – it's bold – to come as creature before creator with a command – but it is in the passive imperative – no less bold – but meaning that in prayer we are commanding the only one who can bring it about

Bring your kingdom – for you are the only one who can.

Do your will – for you are the only one who can.

This prayer counters the unbiblical view that we are responsible to bring in the kingdom for God – no no no – we don't bring in the kingdom for him – he brings in the kingdom for us.

So we pray boldly for his kingdom

We pray into injustice – bring your justice.

We pray into illness – bring your healing.

We pray into fear and anxiety – bring your peace.

We pray into the darkness – bring your light.

We pray into despair – bring your hope.

We pray into evil – bring your goodness.

We pray into hatred – bring your love.

This prayer orients us to that future - bring your kingdom Lord - bring your rule – bring heaven and earth together.

We are re storied toward this end not only in our prayer – but in the sacrament – for the Lord’s supper is not just meant to look back – it is also meant to look forward – as we heard in Isaiah 25 that future is likened to a feast of rich food – a feast of well aged wine – in revelation that future is likened to a wedding banquet – the Lord’s supper is meant to be received as a foretaste of that future wedding feast – that final consummation of all things – that marriage of heaven and earth.

Read Isaiah 25:6-8, 35:1-2, 5-7, 10

4. The biblical passages that point to this future are often deeply poetic, evocative, earthy animated our imagination. For new creation (the meeting of heaven and earth) is beyond our wildest dreams, beyond all possible comprehension. Which of the images in the Isaiah passage animates your imagination, gives birth to hope?
5. It was theologian Stanley Hauerwas who in an interview said – “Christians are embedded in a whole set of revolutionary, subversive practices, while failing to notice their significance. Simply to say that Christians are those who always go to church on Sundays may be a more significant practice than we know. Are there things that Christians should not do on a Sunday? That question has been lost, but we think it needs to be found again. In a world where work is integral to worth, where the majority of our neighbours see Sunday morning as a time to go to the lake or to mow the grass, just getting up, getting dressed, and going to church becomes a form of non-violent protest, a way of saying, “we want a different world”. Discuss.