A Faith to Live By…

Sermons on the Apostles' Creed

12. "The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting…"

The creed ends, naturally enough, by looking to the future, and articulates in a nutshell the shape and the substance of what it is that Christians look forward to. Or at least, it sums up neatly the shape and substance of what the Bible *expects* Christians to look forward to. My guess is that many Christians would find it hard to construct a coherent sentence or two sketching what it is that Christians believe about God's promise concerning their own future, and that of those who could do so a large proportion would give a very misleading and distorted account indeed. And that's not because the subject is by its very nature a difficult and mysterious one. It isn't. The full reality of our future salvation may of course be way beyond our finite understanding, but that's not the problem and its not the issue here. The Bible – Jesus himself, Paul and other writers – don't anywhere suppose that we can sum it up and pin it down exhaustively; but they give us plenty to work with by way of provisional images, parables pointers and indications of what sort of thing it will be, and what sort of thing it will certainly not be. It will *not* be, for instance, an uninterrupted endorsement and celebration of all the stupidity, selfishness, greed and wanton carelessness that human beings have indulged in across the millennia. Instead, it will be a time when justice and peace are established, the high and mighty brought low and the lowly lifted up. Whatever that means. And the point is that we don't need to know *exactly* what it means to be able to say something meaningful about it, something most of us can and would want to affirm rather than deny in broad terms. So, the vague agnosticism or awkward inarticulacy of many Christians with regard to this subject and the erroneous and misleading impressions trotted out confidently by others are not to do with the difficulty of the

topic in hand. They seem, rather, to be due to a curious lack of familiarity with (and presumably a curious lack of interest in?) the things that the New Testament in particular has to say about it (how Jesus, or Paul, or John, or Peter or any other figure known to us from its pages would almost certainly have answered the question), and the distorting effect of what some of us *think* we already know (and what, as a result, many folk in our society *think* Christians believe) about it on the other.

Let's take a step back for a moment and ask whether we can sum up the gist of what, according to Christians, it means for someone to 'be saved' in a single, relatively brief sentence. Set that task, I think it's likely that many folk both inside and outside the churches might say something like: 'People come to faith in Jesus, receive forgiveness for their sins, and go to heaven when they die'. And *there's* the killer phrase. No doubt there are lots of ways in which the rest of the sentence could be tested and found wanting in what it leaves out. But the problem lies here … *'and go to heaven when they die'*. Both in what it suggests, and in the ways in which that is typically imagined, and notwithstanding the familiar refrains of some of our best-loved hymns and even, it must be said, some of our authorized liturgies this is, I contend, a not very Christian belief! In fact, I would be willing to go further and refer to it as a sub-Christian version of things. And if this series of studies on the Apostles' Creed does anything useful for you, I hope it will include reminding you always to replace such vague and misleading iterations with its own much more authentic 'I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting (or, we might say, 'eternal life', or, better yet, 'the life of the age to come').

For the reality is that the Bible rarely speaks at all of 'heaven' as a place to which believers are supposedly translated to dwell in peace, felicity and beatitude with God when we die, a place by definition *removed* from this earth and the sort of life we live and have lived in it. That's not an idea that Jesus or his disciples or any of the early Christians would have recognised. And if, when we do open our New Testaments and dig in, we think we find it there, then we are almost certainly importing it from other sources. The classic culprit, of course, is Dante whose epic

Divine Comedy hinges on three distinct and exotic locations (paradise or heaven being one of them) to which the souls of the dead may find themselves translated when death comes along to interrupt their sojourn in this world. And, of course, Dante is simply reflecting a widespread medieval version of things, which was a popular inspiration for painting, sculpture and drama as well as poetry. But, despite its enormous and enduring influence on the western Christian imagination, this idea of the redeemed as transiting from this present world to enjoy a paradisal existence somewhere else has next to no biblical warrant. It occludes and distorts genuine biblical expectation and proper Christian hope.

When the Bible speaks of 'heaven' it is not picturing some exotic post-mortem all-expenses-paid holiday destination for the recently-retired-from-life-in-the-world. Heaven means wherever God is. Heaven is God's place, or even, we might say, that peculiar *dimension of reality* in which God exists. In the New Testament in particular, the word 'heaven' is often used in effect to refer to God himself, a way of avoiding direct reference to God or God's name, in accordance with devout Jewish practice. So, for instance, in Matthew's gospel the phrase 'kingdom of heaven' is always used where the other gospels have 'kingdom of God' (see, e.g., …). They mean exactly the same thing, they are just different ways of saying it. And neither of them has anything whatever to do with a sort of spiritual Center Parcs geographically remote from our current existence in this world, to which redeemed souls will happily depart (on specially laid-on coaches, like a Saga excursion) in due course. But if you are flicking through the Gospel of Matthew (the first book you come to in the New Testament after all!) with this sort of idea in your head as 'what Christians believe' about salvation involves, and then you stumble across Jesus talking at length about 'entering the kingdom of heaven', of course it's natural enough to find that same skewed idea endorsed and reinforced as 'biblical'.

But that's *not* what Jesus was talking about. 'What must I do to get to heaven when I die?' was not a question on his agenda, or even one he would have recognised as meaningful. Entering the kingdom of heaven is about the same reality Jesus taught his disciples to pray for: 'Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in

heaven'. Your kingdom *come,* on *earth* as *it is* in heaven. In other words, 'entering' the kingdom is a matter of entering into God's sovereign rule, submitting to that rule, and seeing it played out *in the world in which we live,* whether that is now, already, or in some presumed future lying beyond our personal death. And the kingdom (of heaven or of God) is precisely *not* a 'better place' that we go to in order to leave this world behind, but is precisely that exercise of God's sovereignty which we are taught to pray will *come to us*, so that the realities of heaven and earth might coinhere and coincide. It is about *God's coming to be with us*, rather than our translation to be with him, so that his will may finally be done 'on earth as it is in heaven' because heaven and earth will be one and the same. The problem with the Dante, man-on-the-Clapham-omnibus notion of heaven is precisely that it shifts the focus of salvation away from this world, away from its distinctive and complex mix of environments and ecologies, away from its wealth of bio-diversity and its fragile balance of forces and processes, away from the blessings of nature and culture and all that reality and possibility of which, even now, we have only begun to scratch the surface in terms of our appreciation and understanding of it. And salvation becomes, instead, about the translation of individual human souls to a better place.

That is not the Bible's vision, but a pathetic counterfeit. As I have had reason to observe on several occasions before in this series of studies, the *biblical* hope from first to last, already anticipated in the accounts of the creation of the world by God, is in a future when God himself will at last dwell fully in his creation and with his creatures, when 'heaven' will come down to earth, and God's life will be played out 'on earth as it is in heaven' because heaven and earth will be one. The biblical hope is in the coming of God to redeem, to make good, to bring to its proper fulfilment this world in which we live, in all its brokenness and its beauty, in all it woe and all its wonder. The biblical hope is in the transformation of this world in all its fullness, in 'a creation restored by love' as our liturgy puts it, in a world 'ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven' – and we only together with it and as part of it. The biblical hope is in a world suffused by the kingdom of heaven, a world with God's glory at its heart and radiating out in and through every part, a world, as the prophet Habakkuk (2:14) puts it, 'filled with the knowledge of God's glory as the waters

cover the sea'. The biblical hope is in the bringing of God's whole creative project to its glorious fulfilment – and we only together with it and as part of it. A world reconfigured and refurbished, at last fit to be the dwelling place, the temple, the home of God himself – and we together with him. By comparison with that, the notion of the translation of a queue of individual disembodied souls to a disembodied location noted chiefly for doing a good line in pearly gates, clouds, wings and harps is vapid and thin.

And that's the other problem with the man-on-the-Clapham-omnibus version of things, of course. It tends naturally towards a *dematerializing* of things, being all about the salvation of *souls* translated to some disembodied state uncontaminated by the concerns and constraints of flesh and blood. That's an idea that has a long religious and philosophical heritage – that human beings are essentially spiritual, that the material world (and our bodies as part of that) are a prison house to be liberated from, a mortal coil to be shuffled off so that our souls can fly up to be absorbed into some beatific spiritual ether. That notion of what 'life everlasting' or 'eternal life' entails goes back a very long way indeed (and with it, of course, a tendency to denigrate or grant little value to the physical world in which we now live). It is the vision of salvation versions of which you will find admirably presented in Greek philosophy, and in many of the eastern religions – Buddhism, Hinduism and others. And, because these same traditions fed into western culture early on, it has all too often found its way into the church too, not least in the form of 'going to heaven when we die'. But let me say it again: there is absolutely no warrant for any such expectation in the Bible, and it has nothing whatever to do with what Jesus expected or what any of the New Testament writers lead us to expect or to look forward to.

In fact it's the *very opposite* of what they expect. So, for instance, far from desiring to escape from bodily existence into some purely spiritual Nirvana, the apostle Paul (in 2 Corinthians chapter 5) writes of our current existence as one of 'groaning' in the body and longing not to be 'unclothed' (stripped of the body, which would leave us naked, in a thin, insubstantial, wraithlike existence) but clothed by God with a new

body, one suffused with 'life' from heaven. And, of course, we can see why, once we grasp the vision of salvation that Scripture as a whole holds out to us – of a world redeemed rather than relegated; a world transfigured by the fullness of God's presence, rather than left behind; a world fulfilled and suffused with God's glory, a place more substantial, more solid, more real than the world we know now, laden down with 'the eternal weight of glory' as Paul puts it. If this is to be the venue for 'the life of the coming age' or 'life everlasting' as the creed has it, then who would want to left unclothed – bereft of eyes to see and ears to hear and fingers to touch and tongue to taste and to enjoy all its glorious goodness? For a faith that believes in a redeemed cosmos rather than a fleshless sphere of disembodied spirits, for a faith that sees creaturely sensuality as but a shadowy pointer to the richness and blessing of the world's coming fulfilment in God's hands, groaning in the body *now* becomes a natural thing to do (knowing that the sin and pain and suffering of this life are not how things are meant to be, and not how things will eventually be); but longing to be clothed with a new body, one fitted out to share in and to enjoy to the full the new creation, is the most natural desire in the world. *That's* the Christian hope, 'the *redemption* of our bodies' as Paul puts it in Romans 8:23, as part of a creation restored by love.

So, resurrection of the body is part and parcel of what Christians expect 'life everlasting' to be all about, and these two phrases in this week's excerpt from the creed turn out to be two sides of the same coin. Eternal life, the life of the age to come will be an embodied existence (true human existence is always embodied, despite our attempts to imagine otherwise) in a material world marked by none of the suffering which blights our lives in the world as it currently is, but one where goodness, peace, justice, joy and glory will be ours to enjoy with God, always. Again, of course, we cannot imagine in any detail what that life will be like, except in those very broad terms. We don't *need* to do so in order to grasp and hold on to it as something well worth waiting for, trusting God that it will far outstrip even the very best of what life in this world grants us. It will presumably be very different from the life we know now, but continuous with it, because it will be life *in this world* and not some other, albeit this world transfigured (but not 'beyond recognition'!). And

part of that undergirding continuity will be its materiality. Matter itself may be quite different in its properties; but life in the new creation will be *analogous* to our experience of life in the world now, where it is our *bodies* that key us into reality, enable our action and our engagement with others, and so on.

Two brief points before we finish: First, given all the above, the question naturally and properly arises about the present state and location of those who have died. If the resurrection of the body will be part and parcel of the inauguration of a new heaven and new earth, and if that is still to come on the 'Day of the LORD' lying at history's end, where are those we have loved and lost, where are the saints who have gone before us? Obviously, this too is a matter about which precise, authoritative statements are impossible, lying as it does beyond the reach of any relevant knowledge or experience we can bring to bear on it. It is a matter with which Scripture is relatively unconcerned, though there are some glimpses or suggestions to be taken into account. One obvious one is Jesus' own statement to the penitent thief crucified alongside him in Luke's gospel (23:43): 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise'. That doesn't sound like having to wait for the rest of history to play out! So how might we make sense of it? Christian interpreters have generally taken one of two broad views. The first supposes that, historical time as a whole being but the blink of an eye for God, the 'today' here simply points to the futility of matching historical time with 'God's time', and suggests that, no matter at what point on the scale of human history a person dies, they awake immediately into the resurrected state in the new creation. So, while for us who remain the resurrection of the body lies far in the world's future, those who die are lifted out of that timescale altogether, and experience no gap or delay between the two. A good illustration of this is C. S. Lewis's Narnia, where children can go and spend days, weeks, months, even years – and yet when they return to their own world, they discover that no time has passed at all. The temporal scales of the two worlds do not match, but intersect, as it were, tangentially. The other broad view (there are different versions of it) supposes that the dead are translated to a sort of 'holding station', and that this is the 'paradise' to which Jesus' words allude. This, it is generally supposed, is a place of rest and peace and joy, but one in which the

dead exist 'unclothed' as far as bodies are concerned, to await the day of new creation and resurrection. It is not, notice, 'heaven'! It is an intermediate state in which the joining of heaven and earth are still longed for and awaited. I simply offer these two views for consideration. I suspect this is an area where a certain amount of happy agnosticism is permissible, and it is certainly far less important than getting our imagining of 'life everlasting' properly adjusted.

Second, and lastly, we should notice now how reimagining the 'kingdom of heaven' in terms of new creation and resurrection transforms our understanding of Christian discipleship and the church's mission in the world here and now. If, after all, 'heaven' were indeed some disembodied state in a spiritual Nirvana, and if the world in which we currently live and the conditions in which we play out our lives were all to be left behind, discarded for some 'better' place and better way of being, then it would be hard to place any significant value on the here and now, and difficult to understand why, at the end of the day, it mattered much how we lived our lives in the meanwhile. But if, instead, we grasp the fact that 'life everlasting' is going to take the form of *life in this world*, but shot through now with the goodness, justice, peace, joy and glory of God, God's will being done 'on earth as in heaven' from first to last, then the call to live lives that *already* begin to manifest those same characteristics – striving for justice, making for peace, pursuing goodness in all things (not just in our dealings with other people, but with the wider creation too) – immediately makes sense as a call to proclaim the good news about the world's future not just in words but in every aspect of our living, laying down a marker which speaks powerfully of the world's true identity and destiny in God's hands, and struggling against the tide of opposing forces to be true to that identity already, here and now.