

THE ROAD TO NEW CREATION

N.T. WRIGHT

From the Editor: The theme of "new creation" runs throughout the Scriptures, and primarily speaks of the renewing of the world in the age to come, *the eschaton,* the last things. There is much misunderstanding about ideas such as heaven, the end of time, and the implications of Christ's resurrection in the contemporary Church, and our worship music often reflects our struggle to understand these essential ideas.

The following sermon excerpt is from N.T. Wright's sermon at the Service of Re-dedication for the Priory of England and the Islands of the Most Venerable Order of The Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, spoken at Durham Cathedral on Sept. 23, 2006. Special thanks to www.ntwrightpages.com.

There is a great theme in the Scriptures which gives meaning and purpose to all of our life, and sets the framework for what we do here this afternoon. This theme is present in a thousand passages, celebrated in poetry and song, articulated in rich and dense theology, lived out by the Lord Jesus himself. And yet this theme has routinely been ignored or at best marginalized, and sometimes even thrown into the ditch and left to die as the religious and secular worlds pass by on the other side.

NEW CREATION

The theme of which I speak is *new creation.* Our readings (Isaiah 35:1–10; Luke 10:25-37) speak of the road to new creation, the pilgrim path we are called upon to tread, the highway to Zion, to Jerusalem, the city of the living God. And as today we celebrate the work of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, with its historical echoes of pilgrimage, hospitality and healing, I invite you to pause and contemplate the work of this Order, the work to which we rededicate ourselves this afternoon, in terms of this new creation, of the new world which God has already begun to create, and of the pilgrim highway which leads to that new creation, the road by which we are called to travel.

Over the last two hundred years the western world has seen a great divide in the way people look at life; and both halves, I suggest, have been deeply unhealthy. On the one hand, the expansion of empires and industry, of commerce and entrepreneurship, has created a climate in which the individual is what matters, and where that individual has



to look out for him- or herself. There's a ridiculous advertisement just now for instant coffee, which says "It's all about You". It isn't, of course; it's all about company profits, but the advertisers know that our culture has encouraged us to see ourselves as the center of the universe, to believe that human flourishing and fulfillment come from looking after Number One.

Insofar as you think about anyone else, you think of them as an extension of your individuality – your family, your town, perhaps even your country. But ultimately, as we were told twenty years ago, there is no such thing as society, only individuals working for themselves. In that sort of world, you only stop to help the ragged, pathetic figure in the ditch if you recognize them as an extension of yourself – a friend, or family member – or if you think that by doing so you will gain some advantage, make some useful friends, cut a fine figure, or develop a good reputation for being a nice person. Ultimately, it's still all about Me.

A TRAGIC FORGETFULNESS

On the other hand, religion in the western world has been less and less about the renewal of creation and more and more about escaping from this wicked world and going to a better place, called 'heaven' – going there ultimately when we die, but going there by anticipation in the present through prayer and meditation. This essentially other-worldly hope and spirituality has fought its corner robustly against the materialism which has insisted that the only things that exist are things you can touch and see, and money you can put in your pocket. But if you turn Christian faith into simply the hope for pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die, and an escapist spirituality in the present, you turn your back on the theme which makes sense of the whole Bible, which bursts upon us in everything that Jesus the Messiah did and said, *which is highlighted particularly by his resurrection from the dead.*

A religion that forgets about new creation may feel some sympathy for the battered and bedraggled figure in the ditch, but its message to him will always be that though we can help him a bit, ultimately it doesn't matter because the main thing is to escape this wicked world altogether. And that represents a tragic diminishing and distortion of what Christian faith is all about.



DOWN TO EARTH

The God in whom we believe is the creator of the world, and he will one day put this world to rights. That solid belief is the bedrock of all Christian faith. God is not going to abolish the universe of space, time and matter; he is going to renew it, to restore it, to fill it with new joy and purpose and delight, to take from it all that has corrupted it. *'The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad; the desert shall rejoice and blossom, and rejoice with joy and singing; the desert shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.'*

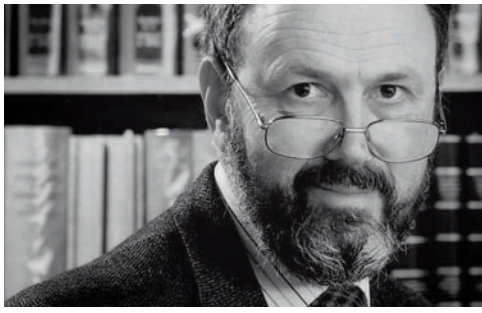
The last book of the Bible ends, not with the company of the saved being taken up into heaven, but with the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, resulting in God's new creation, new heavens and new earth, in which everything that has been true, lovely, and of good report will be vindicated, enhanced, set free from all pain and sorrow. God himself, it says, will wipe away all tears from all eyes. One of the great difficulties in preaching the gospel in our days is that everyone assumes that the name of the game is, ultimately, to 'go to heaven when you die', as though that were the last act in the drama. The hymn we're about to sing ends like that, because that's how most people have thought. But that's wrong! Heaven is important, but it's not the end of the world; God will make new heavens and new earth, and give us new bodies to live and work and take delight in his new creation. And the 'good news' of the Christian gospel is that this new world, this new creation, has already begun: it began when Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead on Easter morning, having faced and beaten the double enemy, sin and death, that has corrupted and defaced God's lovely creation.

NEW CREATION HAS BEGUN IN JESUS

Put it like this, in terms of Jesus' spectacular story. The world, and we humans within it, are in a mess, left for dead in the ditch. The secular world walks past on one side; it hasn't got time to worry about other people's problems, because there's a profit to be made and power to be grabbed. The modern religious world walks past on the other side, believing that this world doesn't matter because we're going to leave it fairly soon and go somewhere else. (These two, of course, reinforce one another.) But the living God has come with healing and hope in Jesus Christ, has picked up the battered and dying world, and has bound up its wounds and set it on the road to full health. This deeply biblical theme, so well known to some other traditions (such as the Eastern Orthodox) and so completely forgotten in much of the Western world and church, makes glorious sense not only of the whole sweep of biblical thought but of the very specific and practical work on which we rightly focus this afternoon.

My friends, we are here because, whether we've thought of it like this or not, we know in our bones that looking after Number One isn't where it's at; that in Jesus Christ we are called not to save ourselves from the world but to bring salvation to the world. We are here because we are committed to the pilgrim way, the way that leads to God's new Jerusalem, and because we know that on that road there is healing: then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

New creation has begun in Jesus.



N.T. Wright is the Anglican Bishop of Durham, England. Previously, he was Canon Theologian at Westminster Abbey. He taught New Testament studies for twenty years at Cambridge, McGill and Oxford Universities. He has been a visiting professor at Harvard Divinity School, Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Gregorian University in Rome and many other institutions around the world. Author of over thirty books, He has been interviewed numerous times by radio and television broadcasters including ABC, NBC, CNN, PBS and NPR. He is married with four young-adult children and two grandchildren.