

New Creation and the Mission of the Church
Reflections by Bishop Tom Wright, October 2022

Hello, I'm Tom Wright, speaking to you from my study in Oxford, in England. I'm sorry that I haven't been able on this occasion to be with you in person. But I'm excited to share with you some reflections for your conference on the theme of New Creation, and how this is part of our joint project as the church. The mission and unity of the church go closely hand in hand. When we return to the scriptural roots of both themes, we begin to see why.

I focus today on a passage which ought to be central in our reading of Paul and Romans, but which has often been ignored: namely, Romans 15.7-13. Romans is easily misread. The church has regularly assumed that the point of Christianity is to enable sinners to go to heaven when they die, and the first eight chapters of Romans has been read in relation to that question. But that's the wrong question, as the second half of the letter indicates. As in the four gospels themselves, Jesus came not to snatch sinners away from earth to a distant heaven, but to enable heaven's life, heaven's rule, heaven's kingdom, to infiltrate and transform the sad and sinful state of earth – and us earthlings.

Now I thank God that many churches have woken up to the challenges that result. I am excited and encouraged by the news of what's going on in your own diocese, with your work on so many fronts, facing up to climate change, economic problems, the refugee crisis and so on. As in the diocese where I served as bishop some years ago, there are many prayerful communities who see these and other needs and are working tirelessly in the power of the Spirit to address them. But I often found that there was then a disconnect between this deeply-felt imperative – Christian people knowing in their bones that they should be addressing these problems – and the more traditional theology, and ways of reading the Bible, in which most of us were brought up. I have done my best as a theologian and exegete on the one hand, and as a church leader on the other, to bring these worlds together, the scriptural world (as it really is) and the world of practical service. And that's what happens in the second half of Paul's letter to Rome.

Romans chapters 9-11, as you will know, address the problem of God's ancient covenant people. But chapters 12-16, my focus now, are then often treated simply as a few concluding practical instructions. Whereas in fact they focus, in chapters 14 and 15 particularly, on precisely the questions of unity and mission that are vital for us today.

In chapter 14 Paul addresses the question of Christian unity across cultural barriers. He doesn't want to make people think instantly of these as *ethnic* barriers until he's established the principle, that aspects of subculture should not get in the way of unity. That's a whole other area worth exploring. But I hurry on to the vital passage, chapter 15 verses 7 to 13, which is really where the entire argument of Romans is heading.

You may recall that right at the beginning of this great letter, the first five verses speak of Jesus as the Davidic Messiah whose resurrection establishes him as Lord of the world. Well, Paul deliberately closes his overall argument with the same point in verse 12: the 'root of Jesse' 'rises to rule the nations'. Paul is arguing, at the real climax of the letter, that Jesus-followers from radically different backgrounds must learn to come together in worship and service of the risen Lord.

To make his point, Paul lines up quotations from all three sections of Israel's scripture (that, for him, was a theological equivalent of heavy underlining). And the final quotation is from Isaiah 11 verse 10: the root of Jesse rises to rule the nations, and in him the nations shall hope. And that leads to the final blessing: may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the holy spirit you may abound in hope. That is the heart of Paul's message to Rome, and indeed of mine to you today.

Now, it might be easy to let verses 12 and 13 wash over us; a fine-sounding conclusion. But when we dig into them it gets better and better. As so often, Paul quotes one line from a larger context, but he intends to bring that whole context with it. So what is Isaiah 11 all about? It is about God's new creation, brought about by the just and wise rule of the Davidic Messiah. Romans is not about 'how to get to heaven'. It is about how the long-promised, scripturally shaped new creation has come to birth. We see this already in the extraordinary vision of cosmic renewal in chapter 8. Jesus on the cross has defeated all the forces of anti-creation, and has now been raised from the dead to be in himself the beginning of new creation – the new creation which is then unleashed upon the world through the Spirit.

This message has often been blunted (ironically, perhaps) in western liberalism. Many have quietly sidelined Jesus' resurrection as a strange and dispensable bit of dogma. But that means forgetting new creation itself. The social imperative that so many are aware of flows directly from God's raising of Jesus from the dead and thus launching that new creation. God be thanked that prayerful Christians have known, in their bones as I said, that new creation was what we ought to be about, even if they hadn't got all the theological back-up. But we

have often robbed ourselves of the deep scriptural dynamic that drives it. In Isaiah 11 God promises that under the rule of the Messiah the whole world will be put right: he rises to rule the nations with true wisdom and justice.

This, actually, explains justification itself, as in the earlier part of the letter. This is where the personal impact of the gospel dovetails into the global or cosmic impact.

Here's how it works. God promises in scripture to the whole world right at last. That remains the horizon. But through the gospel and the Spirit he puts human beings right in the present time – so that we can become part of his 'putting-right' purpose for the world. That's why when Paul talks of someone coming to faith he often uses the word 'Call': the gospel isn't just something to believe, it's a call, a vocation, a summons, to be a new-creation person. The false either/or between personal faith and working for God's justice is the result of modern misconceptions. Paul holds both firmly together.

Now, according to Isaiah 11, the new creation that results from the Messiah's work of wise justice is one of global reconciliation. The wolf will dwell with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the kid, and so on. Ancient and modern interpreters have debated whether that's to be taken literally or metaphorically; I think the answer is both. God will accomplish his new creation, the ultimate goal for which Eden was the pilot project, the new Jerusalem which will come down from heaven to earth. But wild animals were often seen, in Isaiah itself and later readings, as allegories for the warring nations of the world. We who once again live with the daily news of the wolves and the leopards attacking the lambs and the kids – we need this vision of reconciliation as well. And Paul, invoking the final verse of the Isaiah passage, in the light of what he'd already said in chapter 8, is celebrating this hope too. And here's the point: *The coming together of Jews and Gentiles (and hence of all different ethnic groups) in the single family of praise and worship is the present instantiation of the coming cosmic and global transformation.*

Yet another point emerges from Paul's quotation of Isaiah 11. That prophetic passage, in the verse just before the one Paul quotes, declares 'they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.' That wonderful promise (how do the waters cover the sea? The waters *are* the sea) is matched by similar lines scattered across the Old Testament. As in 1 Corinthians 15, God will at the last be 'all in all', united in love with his glorious creation. And Paul's point here – and my point to you today, vital for the work of the church right now – is

that the worshipping and witnessing church is to be the advance sign of this new reconciled reality.

That's why he emphasizes his blessing in verse 13 that the God of hope will *fill you* with all joy and peace, so that you may *abound in hope*. Again, that's easy to say but it's important to think through. Paul has compressed everything down: if he spelled it all out, his letters would be ten times longer! Just as the earth will be filled with God's knowledge and glory, so the church in its present life and work is to be an advance sign of that reality.

The point – for us today – is this. *The church, precisely in its unity across ethnic and cultural lines, is to be an advance sign of new creation. We are called to be a small working model of the world which God will one day make – and which he has already launched in Jesus' resurrection.* Every congregation, every Bible study group, every diocese, and please God every larger church body – I know this is asking a lot! – is supposed to be, in its inner worshipping life and in its daily work for justice and peace in the world, a signpost to the coming day in which God will renew the whole creation just as surely as Jesus was raised from the dead.

This is particularly important in western Protestantism, where we have for many years colluded with segregated churches. Legal segregation was of course abolished a while back, but it persists as a matter of ongoing cultural choice – and it is a denial of Romans 14 and 15, showing that the whole message of the letter has been forgotten. As long as we are reading Romans simply telling us how we, as individuals, might get to heaven, the question of ethnic churches doesn't seem to matter too much. But the revolution in Pauline studies this last generation has emphasized that justification itself is bound up with the shocking coming together of Jew and Gentile in messianic faith-communities. When we stand back and see the whole sweep of Romans, we should see clearly that the division of churches by national, linguistic, ethnic or cultural boundaries has effectively blunted our witness. After all, in Revelation 7 the church consists of a great multitude from every nation, tribe and tongue *together* singing the song of the Lamb. That isn't a vision for some long-distant, faraway future. It's a vision for right now.

Now this – if I can speak frankly to an issue which concerns us in Britain as well as you in the USA – addresses the problem of the Black Lives Matter movement. Many devout Christians have been alarmed at this new development – despite its rather obvious urgency, granted appalling policing practices on both sides of the Atlantic – because of its links with communist and anarchist movements. But, as often, that only happened because for generations the

churches hadn't been doing their job. We followers of Jesus were supposed to be the original multi-ethnic, multi-cultural family, a sign of new creation *to* the world as well as a power of new creation *in* the world. But western Protestantism has laid so much stress on finding how to go to heaven, and then on having liturgy and scripture in one's own language (which of course I totally support), that the churches weren't bothered about trans-ethnic or trans-cultural unity. We Europeans exported to the New World a Christianity that was already lacking in one of its primary vocations. And here in Romans 14 and 15 we find the answer.

Now my time is nearly up, and all I've done is draw your attention to the remarkable exegetical and practical potential of a few verses in one chapter in Romans. But I hope you see how vital this is. Were there more time I would like to develop several other passages. You may want to follow these up.

The only one for which I have a final moment now is the letter to the Ephesians. Ephesians is a visionary letter: it gives you the whole cosmic map and then tells you where you are on that map. Ephesians 1.10: God's purpose is to sum up all things in heaven and earth in the Messiah. (There's no thought there of snatching people away from earth to populate a detached 'heaven'!) And by the end of Ephesians chapter 1 the church, as here in Romans 15, is the foretaste of that combined heaven-and-earth reality. How that comes about is spelled out in chapter 2, which ends with the Jew-plus-Gentile church as the new *temple* – the place where right now God lives by his Spirit. Exactly as in Romans 15. And the result, in chapter 3 verse 10, is that *through the church the many-coloured wisdom of God might be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places*. In other words, the very existence of the church, this strange cross-cultural radically new community, is a sign to the powers – in Paul's day, to Caesar – that Jesus is Lord and he isn't.

But this doesn't stop with the sheer existence of the church, important though that is. It flows directly into the public work which the church does to express the healing love of God. Paul speaks in chapter 2 of the 'good works which God prepared beforehand'. 'Good works' here doesn't mean obedience to a moral law; that's taken for granted. In the first century 'good works' were the things people did to benefit society as a whole. From the start, the church – following Jesus, of course – was active in healing, in education, and not least in serving the poor.

You see, in and through all this (I haven't even mentioned John's gospel though this is loud and clear there as well) the point of the biblical narrative is not (to say it again) about how humans leave earth and find their way to heaven. The

Word became *flesh* and pitched his tent in our midst! As Jesus insisted again and again, the point of the biblical narrative is about the long promises of the creator God, Israel's God, to come and dwell with his people on earth. The climax of the book of Revelation is not saved souls going up to heaven, but the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth; and the strapline is 'The dwelling of God is with humans', not vice versa.

This is rooted in Israel's scriptures. The wilderness Tabernacle and Solomon's temple were advance signs of this divine intention to dwell with the people. In the New Testament, not least in John and Paul, this temple-symbol is focused on Jesus and then on the Spirit. There is a reason why Jesus cleansing of the Temple is such a crucial moment in all four gospels. There is a reason why, in Acts, more or less all the controversies take place at points where the church and the existing temple-structures confront one another. My friends, we have so often got the gospel the wrong way up, and then we've had trouble incorporating into it all the things we know in our bones we ought to be doing, in and for the world with its many urgent needs. But once we glimpse afresh the biblical vision, we find ourselves called, by the gospel and the Spirit, to be people of hope, to abound in hope.

God's new world is coming. It's been launched by Jesus. It is energized by the Spirit. It will happen. Go back to Romans 8 and study it all there. This isn't an escapist hope for ourselves alone. We are to be hope-bringing people for the world: small working models of new creation both as united churches and as individual Christians. God has promised that the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea; we are called to be full of God's Spirit and wisdom in the present, to be already an advance element of that ultimate purpose. I thank God that so many in our own day, not least in your diocese, have glimpsed this vocation. My task, as an exegete and theologian, is to provide the back-up structure, the spiritual and intellectual scaffolding, to turn these glimpses into clearer sight and to encourage you to persevere.

So may the God of hope be with you! Amen.