

82 A totally different view

I've been quiet of late because I'm reading two Tom Wright books at the same time: *Surprised by Hope* and the more recent, *The Day the Revolution Began*, each of several hundred pages.

I started reading them because, as I've mentioned before, Jesus talked a lot about the kingdom, and yet it's a concept that I have not heard expounded much in the churches I have attended. How about you?

Tom Wright is saying that you can't properly understand the cross unless you see it in context with God's overall plan for humankind – Genesis to Revelation – and that is what I think God was pointing me towards through the amazing 'coincidences' of the three days that I mentioned in The tree of life [80].

This morning I continued reading Revelation, and 5:10 stood out in flashing lights, how the people purchased by Jesus' blood "will **reign** on the **earth**". God's overall plan is not to rescue people **out** of this evil place, and take us to a lovely heaven, somewhere, but rather to restore things to what God always, always intended: for us to worship God (priests) and rule (kings) **on the earth**. (If you can find scriptures talking about 'going (up) to heaven' and 'going (down) to hell', do let me know – I don't see it that way anymore.)

This idea of our ruling and reigning has given me a totally different view of my vocation and calling in life. I'm not here to tell as many individuals as possible how they can be 'saved', but rather to somehow establish God's kingdom on earth, here and now (in anticipation of the glorious future we are promised). "Yes, but what does that actually mean in practical terms?!" I don't know, but I suspect that finding out is the next stage on my long and tortuous journey.

How I praise God for leading me on!

Paul Bev. 16.8.19

Maybe this passage from the 'Revolution' book will help:

Called to the Royal Priesthood

I am suggesting that, in the Bible, humans are created in order to live as worshipping stewards within God's heaven-and-earth reality, rather than as beings who, by moral perfection, qualify to leave "earth" and go to "heaven" instead. This vision of the human vocation comes into focus in the book of Revelation:

Glory to the one who loved us, and freed us
from our sins by his blood, and made us a
kingdom, priests to his God and father—glory
and power be to him forever and ever. Amen.
(1:5–6)

You are worthy to take the scroll;
You are worthy to open its seals;

For you were slaughtered and with your own blood
You purchased a people for God,
From every tribe and tongue,
From every people and nation,
And made them a kingdom and priests to our God
And they will reign on the earth. (5:9–10)

Blessed and holy is the one who has a share
in the first resurrection! The second death has
no power over them. They will be priests to
God and the Messiah, and they will reign
with him for a thousand years. (20:6)

The third passage repeats the vocation ('royal priesthood'), but not the means by which it is achieved (the Messiah's death); but the first two are quite clear. The death of Jesus, 'freeing us from our sins' and 'purchasing a people for God', was not simply aimed at rescuing humans from 'hell', so that they could go to 'heaven' instead, which is the picture most Christians have when they think about Jesus' death.

The great scene at the end of the book is the joining together of the 'new heavens and new earth'. Being there in the presence of God and the Lamb will give back to the redeemed the role marked out for them from the beginning in Genesis and reaffirmed as Israel's vocation in the book of Exodus. There God promises his newly rescued people that they will be his 'treasured possession', 'a priestly kingdom and a holy nation' (19:5–6). The priestly vocation consists of summing up the praises of creation before the Creator; the royal vocation, in turn, means reflecting God's wisdom and justice into the world. This is a direct outworking of Genesis 1:26–28, where humans are created in the divine image. The book of Revelation picks up this theme exactly where Israel's scriptures left off. It says—shockingly, of course—that the ancient vocation had been renewed in a new and revolutionary way through the death of the Messiah. Once we get the goal right (the new creation, not just "heaven") and the human problem properly diagnosed (idolatry [I mentioned this idea of sin being idolatry in [79]] and the corruption of vocation [i.e. not being kings and priests, as we should], not just 'sin'), the larger biblical vision of Jesus' death begins to come into view.

A short aside may be needed at this point. Some readers may feel anxious about both elements of the vocation I am describing, the 'royal' bit and the 'priestly' bit. Let me say a word about each.

For many people, not least those who got rid of monarchs in the eighteenth century, the very idea of kings or queens seems outdated, antiquated, unnecessary, and quite possibly abusive. People often ask me why I continue to talk about the 'kingdom of God' when kingdoms in general have been such a disaster, making a few people rich and proud and a great many people poor and downtrodden. My normal answer is that things were like that in the first century too, if anything worse (think of Herod; think of Caesar!), but that Jesus went on talking about God becoming king anyway. Why did he do that? Answer: Because the perversion of human rule is just that, a perversion. We ought not to let the perversion rob us of the good news; and the good news is not only that God is sorting out the world, but that his rule is a different kind of rule entirely, from those that give monarchs a bad name. Prophetic passages such as Isaiah 11 and psalms such as Psalm 72 demonstrate that when God is faced with the corruption of monarchy, he promises not

to abolish monarchy, but to send a true king to rule with utter justice, making the poor and needy his constant priority. The human vocation to share that role, that task, is framed within the true justice and mercy of God himself.

So too with 'priesthood'. This word makes many people think of corrupt hierarchies, organizing 'religion' for their own purposes and threatening dire, and indeed 'divine', punishments for any who step out of line. Again, the abuse does not invalidate the proper use. The notion of priesthood, admittedly now often exposed as a cloak for selfish wrongdoing, is another vital part of being human. We humans are called to stand at the intersection of heaven and earth, holding together in our hearts, our praises, and our urgent intercessions the loving wisdom of the creator God and the terrible torments of his battered world. The Bible knows perfectly well that this priestly vocation can be corrupted and often has been. But once more it proposes not abolition, but full and complete cleansing. The Coming One 'will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to YHWH in righteousness' (Mal. 3:3). This ancient Jewish promise points ahead to the ultimate 'priesthood' of Jesus himself.

We should not be surprised, then, that horrible abuses have spoiled our sense of both the royal and the priestly vocations. That is what we should expect. The remarkable thing is that the Creator, having made the world to work in this way—with humans functioning like the 'image' in a temple, standing between heaven and earth and acting on behalf of each in relation to the other—has not abandoned the project. Yes, it gets distorted again and again. But it remains the way the world was supposed to work—and the way in which, through the gospel, it will work once more. The powers that have stolen the worshipping hearts of the world and that have in consequence usurped the human rule over the world would like nothing better than for humans to think only of escaping the world rather than taking back their priestly and royal vocations.

The Day the Revolution Began, chapter 4, pp 94-98(?)