

Hope, Unity and Life in the Spirit

Learning from the Lectionary: May to August 2022

Breakfast on the beach	John 21:1-19
Coming out of the great ordeal	Revelation 7:9-17
Death will be no more	Revelation 21:1-8
The union of heaven and earth	Rev 21:9-10, 22-22:5
Let everyone come!	Rev 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21
I will send my Spirit	Acts 2:1-21
The Spirit of truth	John 16:12-15
Being made one in Christ	Galatians 3:23-29
The freedom of life in the Spirit	Galatians 5:1,13-25
Dead to the world	Galatians 6:7-16
See where you fit into God's redemption story	Colossians 1:1-14
Rejoicing in my sufferings	Colossians 1:15-28
Buried with Christ, raised to life	Colossians 2:6-15
Christ is all that matters	Colossians 3:1-11
Being sure of what we hope for	Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
Running the race like Jesus did	Hebrews 11:29-12:2
A kingdom that cannot be shaken	Hebrews 12:18-29
The obedience of faith	Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Including edited reflections from 'Twelve months of Sundays' and 'The New Testament for everyone' both by Prof NT Wright

Tom Wright is one of today's leading New Testament scholars with a gift for bringing biblical theology into everyday reflections.

He was the Bishop of Durham from 2003 to 2010. He then became research professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at St Andrews in Scotland until 2019, when he became a senior research fellow at Wycliffe Hall at the University of Oxford.

Wright writes about theology and Christian life and the relationship between them. He is known for his scholarship on Paul, on justification and women's ordination.



Breakfast on the beach John 21:1-19

Tom says:

Jesus reveals himself to Peter and His friends as they fish on lake Galilee. He feeds them by the lake. He offers forgiveness, challenge and commission. The fishing, the feeding, the forgiveness and the challenge are all shot through with a sense of something accomplished now to be worked out, something achieved that must now be implemented, something which Jesus has done which must now sweep Peter and the rest along in the tidal wave of new life, new possibilities. The scene is full of a sense of freshness and wonder: sunrise, lake and breakfast picnic hint at the transformation of creation itself.

The whole story is pervaded with this sense of transformation. 'None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?", because they knew it was the Lord.' Jesus is the same, yet somehow different. He is described as a man among men, yet he has somehow been changed. ...Nothing in Judaism had prepared the disciples for this.

The transformation spreads through the scene. Fishing, after a night of hard and fruitless work, becomes a sudden morning surprise. The conversation Peter needed but no doubt dreaded transformed his three denials into three stumbling affirmations of love and loyalty, with Jesus' questions themselves being turned into three commissions: feed my lambs, tend my sheep, feed my sheep. Finally, the transformation of vocation itself: no longer is Peter to be Jesus' blustering right-hand man, ready (so he thought) to die for Jesus (13.37) out of a sense of pride and self-importance; rather, because Jesus has laid down his life for Peter, Peter will in turn glorify God by laying down his own life.

Questions:

Warm-up: The Greek word for 'charcoal fire' occurs twice in John. Where else does it come?

Seven of the disciples return to a familiar activity in a familiar place, led by the fishermen.

- What led them back to Galilee and to fishing?
 - o Distraction and escape? Creating time for reflection? Trying to return to normal?
- How do you typically deal with disappointment and disillusionment with God? What are your coping mechanisms? Which way do you run?
- Are there any parallels between your response to disappointment and the disciples'?

What does Jesus' dialogue tell you about Peter, Jesus and yourself?

- Jesus first 'do you love me?' questions use the word *agape* for divine love but the third time he uses the word *philo* describing brotherly love. Is this significant?
- In our own walk with Jesus what would *agape* and *philo* love look like and what are the key differences between a 'Godly love' of Jesus and a 'brotherly love' of Jesus?
- Even though Peter struggles to live up to an *agape* love, what had changed between his three denials on Good Friday morning and his three affirmations of love and loyalty?
- What single 'transformation' would you like Jesus to help you with in your life?

'This time next week'... How will you allow Jesus to begin this 'transformation'?



Coming out of the great ordeal Revelation 7:9-17

Following Easter, as we saw last week in John 21, Jesus the Lamb is also the Shepherd who commissions His followers to tend His flock.

Tom Wright says:

Revelation uses the same imagery: the 'shepherd' himself turns out to be the lamb that was slain. This confirms the radical redefinition of leadership in God's economy: a meek, unwilling prophet in Exodus, a little child in Isaiah, and now a slaughtered lamb.

Conversation starter (no rights or wrongs!): John is glimpsing the eternal throne room of God yet the Lamb who becomes a shepherd can only happen after Easter. How's that?

- Reread Revelation 7: 9 – 12 It is a beautiful glimpse into the relationship between the Father, Jesus the Lamb and His redeemed people.
 - What emotions do you feel as you imagine yourself with John in that place?
 - Are the angels, the mysterious four living creatures, the 24 elders and the great multitude bowing down to Jesus out of gratitude, respect, awe...?
 - Are they bowing down because of what Jesus has done or who He is?
- Thinking of Creation, human free will, the risks of the incarnation, the substitution of His own life to save His people from the destruction of sin... what does this tell you about the character of God?
 - How does this affect how the follower of Jesus should engage with the world?
 - Where might you and I be going wrong and why?
- Read John 13: 12 - 17 and Philippians 2: 3 – 8
 - What do these passages teach us how a follower of Jesus should live their lives?
 - Can you think of any good examples of friends (or well known people) who display this Christlike way of life in some way?
 - In which ways can our lives today emulate this? How do our lives fall short?

For silent reflection (2 minutes):

- Phil. 2:1 ² ...*Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.* ³ *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.* ⁴ *Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.* ⁵ *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus...*
- What are the thoughts, attitudes or behaviours in your life which stand in the way of following Jesus' example for living?

John Stott's daily morning prayer: 'Father God, I pray that I may love you more and more this day. Lord Jesus, this day may I take up my own cross and follow you more closely. Holy Spirit I pray that this day you will cause your fruit to ripen in me. Amen



This time next week... How will you have brought more of this pattern into your daily life? What do you need to do more of, what will you do less? Pray with each other for God's strength and help to live more and more like this



Death will be no more Revelation 21:1-8

Tom Wright:

At the moment when the new Jerusalem comes down as a bride adorned for her husband, the uniting of God and His people and his tender healing of all their hurts, are themselves the ultimate end of the story; the victory of love over all that distorts and defaces, damages and destroys God's good and beautiful world.

Conversation starter (no right or wrongs!):

If God's Church represents God's new society, His New Jerusalem, then why does it descend out of heaven to the new earth?

(Comforting fact: Don't be alarmed that there will be no more sea (v1)! Throughout the bible (e.g. Moses, Job, Jesus in the storm, Paul in the shipwreck) the sea represents all the uncontrolled chaos in the fallen world which confronts the peace, order and safety of God's perfect Creation. It's not heretical to hold out hope for a peaceful beach or two in heaven!)

- What difference does the vision of Revelation 21: 1 – 8 make to today's world?
 - o Why is it important/ helpful for us to see this glimpse of our future destination?
- Does the knowledge this will happen one day let us off the hook for striving towards it?
- If the Kingdom of God is Now (as well as Not Yet) then what does this passage teach us about 'seeking first the Kingdom of God' here today?
 - o What are God's priorities? What role can each of us play as Kingdom bringers?

Moving into prayerful response and listening for God's voice:

- Read verses 1 to 8 again and then be silent for a minute or two together. Keep a bible in front of you if you can (or google Bible Gateway on your phone)
 - o Immerse yourself in that scene, imagining that you are there standing with John being shown all this.
 - o Don't move on quickly. Take in all the details; the beauty of the new City, the incredible promise that Almighty, All Holy, All Powerful God will actually 'live among His people', that every tear will be gone, that death, mourning, crying and pain will never happen again....
 - o In the silence tell Jesus what is on your heart
 - o Listen to what Jesus might be saying to you
- Join in prayer together
 - o Thanksgiving & praise. Prayers for ourselves and all who continue to hurt, mourn and weep. Prayers for steadfast faith to cling onto this hope of new heavens and a new earth. Pray 'Thy Kingdom come' and ask how we should play a part in that.

This time next week... Who do you know who needs to hear this beautiful vision of hope? Who can you share it with? Commit to each other to talk about this with at least one person before next week – and hold each other to account!



The union of heaven and earth Rev 21:9-10, 22-22:5

From Tom:

No Temple, no sun or moon, and no uncleanness either. A world without evil is, to us, as inconceivable as a world without sun and moon - and, for first-century Jews, a holy city without a Temple was equally inconceivable. God himself will be personally present, and the whole city will shine with His light.

The city is not the totality of God's eventual new world; it is the focal point of a world which will finally see God's light and discover his healing. The river of life-giving water, like the rivers of Eden, will flow from it. Worship will be face to face, not through a glass darkly; and God's desire for relationship with humankind will meet no resistance, as God embraces all creation.

Images of the future beckon us along the way. But they also work backwards, as it were, shedding light on our present darkness. Jesus promises a peace which nothing in the present world can provide, a peace which comes from, and points to, God's future. This is what happens when God himself, Father, Son and Spirit, comes to be at home with those who love God and keep his word, anticipating in the present the promise of the new holy city.

Conversation starter (no right or wrongs!): Will God's Kingdom come to earth or will this present earth be drawn into His new and perfect Kingdom? What difference does this make?

Questions

- John observes the distinction between heaven and earth will pass away – they will be one and the same place. It's the culmination of everything God intended since the Fall
 - o How do you imagine your life will be in the City?
 - o How is that different from the way you live right now?
 - o In what ways can you begin living the life of the perfect City now?

- God's relationship with humankind begins in the perfection of a Garden, goes through the Fall (Gen 3: 21 – 24) and ends in the perfection of City.
 - o Is this significant? What is the difference between a city and a garden?
 - o Could this tell us anything about the journey humankind has been on – the creation of nations? Progress in human science and understanding? Developments in human culture?
 - o Has God's interaction with human society had an effect?

- Tom Wright highlights how images from the future 'shed light on our present darkness'. What do you think he means? In particular, how does this vision of the future joining of heaven and earth shape the way God's people should engage with the world today?

This time next week: Be ready to come back and share with each other any ways – large or small – that your daily walk with Jesus has changed in the light of this future image of union with God.



Let everyone come! Rev 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

Read with Wright:

The glittering and dazzling portrayal of Jesus, the Alpha and Omega, the bright morning star, is meant to lead the eye away from all other distractions and allegiances. By contemplating this Jesus we fulfil his own prayer: that we may be with him where he is, to see his glory, begotten of the Father's love. The vision of God's glory, denied to Moses, is granted in Jesus Christ.

The central characteristic of that vision is of course love: God's love for Jesus and, through Jesus, for all his people; the love of God's people for one another, creating a unity which will indeed reveal to the world the disturbing message that there is another way of being human. Disunity may perhaps be the ultimate worldliness, since it means accepting that we are defined, in the last analysis, by something other than the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Group discussion...

Disunity

- Unity of God's people is highly important to God. How important is unity to you?
- What does a church living in unity together look like?
- How far are we from that? Are we really working together like a single Body?
- In what ways can we strive for greater unity both together and as individuals.

'For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God.' Acts 20:27

You may have noticed that the Church of England's set reading for this week (see above) omits verses 15, 18 and 19. Find a bible and read them. Setting aside the irony of setting a bible passage which omits the words 'if anyone takes these words away'...

- Are we really bought in to the *whole* gospel? Is it possible we have 'sugar-coated' it by focusing on the bits we like and overlooking Jesus' more difficult demands?
- Jesus speaks 'comfortable words' but what do you think of the uncomfortable ones? (e.g. *If anyone would follow me, let them take up their cross (Mt 16:24) ..., then I will tell you plainly, get away from me, I never knew you (Matt 7:23..., Small is the gate and few will find it ... (Mt 7: 13-14)*)
- What steps can we take to increase our knowledge and understanding of the full gospel message? Who can help us wrestle with the more difficult parts of the bible?

Homework: Intentionally read Matthew or Luke's gospel – ideally in a single sitting – in order to grasp everything Jesus said and did. Be ready to come back and discuss...

This time next week...

How can you act towards more church unity and encouraged others to do the same?

