



SERMON

A few weeks ago I had the pleasure of attending a Shakespearean play at the Globe Theatre in London, rebuilt near the site of the original Globe of Shakespeare's day. The play was Macbeth, and a gritty, gory production it was too!

Imagine for a moment that in a dusty cellar somewhere in London the manuscript of a formerly unknown Shakespearean play has been discovered. The manuscript is complete, apart from Act 5, the final act of the play, for which there is only the first scene. There are plenty of clues in what *is* there to suggest how Act 5 might play out, and hints as to the dramatic climax.

So the Globe Theatre commissions an experienced group of actors to stage the play. The actors learn the first four Acts inside-out, along with Act 5 Scene 1, and present them just as written. It's decided that they should improvise the rest of Act 5. Their improvisation will need to be consistent with the play so far, and faithful to Shakespeare's clues as to the finale. Beyond that, they will need all their creative imagination, their dramatic skills and their knowledge of Shakespeare to fulfil their role.

This is how New Testament scholar Tom Wright explains the place of the church, our place, in the great drama of God's purposes. We're called to be those actors, steeped in the big picture, the big story of Scripture that we have been reflecting on over the last few weeks, and stepping on to the world stage to play out our part in the biblical drama. Let me remind you of the shape of that drama:

(1) *Act I: Creation.* Genesis 1-2 unfolds for us the *purposes* of in *creating* the universe, and human beings in his own image. Creation is blessed by God, and declared good, and human beings are given stewardship of what God has made.

(2) *Act II: Fall.* Genesis 3-11 shows how the harmony of creation is fractured by human self-centredness and sin.

(3) *Act III: Israel.* Genesis 12-50 and beyond tells of God's *promise* through Abraham to *redeem* the effects of human sinfulness in a way that would ultimately bless all the

peoples of the earth. We have the outworking of that through Moses, through covenant, kingship and the prophets.

(4) *Act IV: Jesus.* In continuity with all that has come before, Jesus then steps on to the stage, declaring that the kingdom of God is at hand. In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus stands to read from the Isaiah scroll:

“the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour”.

Then, to everyone’s amazement, Jesus makes an extraordinary claim: *“Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”* His ministry bears out the reality of his claim, as he brings the good news of God’s grace and sets captives free. Act 4 climaxes with Jesus dying for the brokenness of humanity, to reconcile us to God, and rising to offer the possibility of new life and freedom in the power of the Spirit.

The rest of the New Testament forms the first scene of Act 5, demonstrating how the church continues the story of Jesus, and giving hints as to what the ultimate fulfilment of the biblical drama will mean. And from the first century to the twenty-first, the church’s challenge has been to live that story - faithful to all that Scripture tells, yet needing Spirit-inspired creativity and imagination to meet the challenge of an ever changing context.

What might that look like in practical terms? Let’s start with the creation, and the way we as the people of God relate to creation. The great biblical drama begins with creation and will end with new creation. As we heard in the reading from Isaiah 65, the scope of the prophetic vision of God’s purposes is cosmic: a redeemed community enjoying “a new heavens and a new earth.”

There is a point of view out there that as Christians we shouldn’t bother working toward peace and justice, or be concerned about climate change, wars, famines, etc. This planet is headed for the scrap heap, they say, and we should welcome an increase in wars and catastrophes as signs that the Lord’s return is imminent. Yet in Act 1, God entrusts human beings with stewardship of creation. In Act 3, Israel is called to pursue justice, and to care for the land that God has gifted to them. And if the Lord’s return *is* imminent, then we had better be found being about the Lord’s business, which is to manifest the true nature of the kingdom of God in all that we do. Why God should want to entrust his new heaven and earth to those who have trashed the present one is a question worth pondering!

And what about the way we, the church, do community? Act 1 paints an ideal of harmonious relationships. Act 2 highlights human sinfulness, leading to alienation and

enmity. Act 3 concerns the covenant community, with its mandate to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God. In Act 4, Jesus teaches love for enemies, and in his death and resurrection we have the possibility of a new kind of humanity in which ... *"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all are one in Christ Jesus."* (Gal 3:28)

When the church lives toward this vision we offer the world a glimpse of life in the kingdom of God. The quality of community that we are seeking to build here is not simply about providing an alternative to other homogeneous social clubs. It's about demonstrating that genuine love and justice are possible between men and women, Maori and Pakeha, young and old, barristers and beneficiaries - when together we place our lives under the cross of Jesus, which dissolves all such dividing walls.

So then, as the people of Act 5, we have this wonderful heritage of the biblical story to inform our imagination and living. And we have the awesome privilege of sharing in what God is doing *now* to fulfil his promises and establish his kingdom in our midst. As Mr Beaver says, in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Aslan is on the move! The ice which imprisoned Narnia, where it was always winter, but never Christmas, is beginning to thaw. The signs of spring are around us, and give us hope even when it is still cold and dark. The warm breath of Aslan is bringing frozen creatures to life.

At the same time, paradoxically, we live in the time of "not yet." Why? Because *not yet* do we see an end to sorrow, sickness, death or injustice. *Not yet* do we see a final end to hatred and abuse, nor swords beaten into plough shares, nor the lion lying down with the lamb in a new world order of peace. And although we may see the power of God in healing, *not yet* have these bodies, which are dying, been transformed into incorruptible resurrection bodies. *Not yet* do we see healing for our struggling planet, which awaits the time when God renews the heavens and the earth.

Fulfilment, now and not yet. Paradoxes are never easy to get a handle on, but this is one we must rightly grasp, because "now and not yet" is our unique place in the biblical drama. If Tolkien's hobbits lived in Middle-Earth, we live in Middle-Time. What is it like to live in Middle-Time? Paul gives a vivid description in our Romans 8 passage. It's like giving birth!

The other day in the morning tea room at Laidlaw College one of my colleagues was talking about her progress with her PhD. She said that a friend had compared the process of writing a doctorate to giving birth. As someone who's been giving birth for several years now, PhD wise, I commented that doing a doctorate seemed to involve a lot more hard work than being pregnant did. When several pairs of eyes turned on me disapprovingly, I realised that I was the only male in the room, and that everyone else

present had in fact literally given birth. It was time to shut up and return to my newspaper!

In verse 19, Paul says that creation is waiting “with eager longing” for a birth to happen - “the revealing of the children of God.” When will the new redeemed humanity, the daughters and sons of God in all their transformed glory, finally be revealed to the universe? When that time comes, creation itself will be reborn, according to verse 21: “creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

An exciting prospect, but the corollary in verse 22 is that Middle-Time is characterised by “labour pains”, both for creation and for us. Together with creation we wait and groan:

“the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies” (vv22-23).

Some Christians believe that by embracing the “now” fully, we should be able to somehow rise above the pain and struggle of the “not yet.” If we claim the power that we have in Jesus’ name, we can rebuke all sin, suffering, sickness and setbacks. If we claim our inheritance as the children of God, we can claim the right to health, wholeness and prosperity.

Well, as children of God who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we certainly can come to God without fear and pray boldly in Jesus’ name. Paul did, as he tells us in 2 Corinthians 12. God had given him extraordinary visions of the life to come. He knew his inheritance. And when he found himself severely troubled by what he calls “a thorn in the flesh”, “a messenger of Satan,” he prayed to God about it. Not just once, but he persevered in prayer, three times appealing strongly to the Lord that it would leave him. It didn’t. Instead God reminded Paul of his grace which would be sufficient to sustain him, and of his power which would be most real to him in his weakness.

Middle-time, now and not yet time, is a time when our taste of life in the kingdom of God is real, yet provisional and partial. When I was a student at Bible College I was in a cell group with a hard case Aussie called Geoff. The first thing he did on coming to New Zealand was buy a big green Holden Kingswood. I remember, because I bought it off when he went back home. Geoff had a powerful testimony of being healed of cancer. After College he went back to Sydney to be a school chaplain, like Gareth, in a posh boys’ school, like Gareth. I visited him and his young family there and heard about the impact he was having in the school. The next time I went back to Sydney, a year or two later, Geoff was dead. The cancer had returned, and this time there was to be no healing – at least, not in this temporal dimension. Why? Same guy, same God, same prayer in the name of Jesus. Mystery.

Paul's experience and Geoff's experience are not unusual. We can think of well known people of faith. Why did C. S. Lewis' wife Joy Davidman experience a remission in her cancer, only later to suffer the pain again and to die? Why did his friend J. B. Phillips suffer from repeated bouts of depression? Why was John Wimber, founder of the Signs and Wonders ministry, never healed from heart disease, and allowed to die of a brain haemorrhage? Why did my own younger sister die of a brain haemorrhage last year? No doubt there are "whys" in your own story, or the story of close friends and family.

Middle-time is characterized by mystery. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, one day we will see and know clearly, but now we see as in a mirror dimly, and know only in part. Sometimes, like Paul with his thorn in the flesh, we may grasp the reason why God is allowing us to see his power in weakness rather than in signs and wonders. Many times, as with my mate Geoff, or my sister Marion, we are simply cast back on faith and a decision to believe that God is good.

In our Romans 8 passage Paul affirms strongly that the sufferings of this present time, Middle-time, "are not worth comparing to the glory about to be revealed to us." That is a faith position, and sometimes the realities of present suffering seem more real and tangible to us than future glory. And so we groan as we wait. As Paul acknowledges in verse 25, "hope that is seen is not hope."

Summing up then, Middle-time, our "now and not yet" scene within Act 5 of the great biblical drama, is a time of opportunity to witness to the shape of God's future purposes for creation and humanity; it is a time of real power, but our glimpses of glory are partial; it's a time of deep meaning, yet also of deep mystery; it's a time of joyful celebration and anticipation, yet there is also suffering and groaning in our waiting; it's a place of tremendous and certain hope, yet much of what we hope for is not yet seen.

Middle-Time can be a confusing time. How should we pray in the light of all this? Listen to Paul's wonderful affirmation in verses 26-27:

"the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs (groans) too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." We can be reassured that the Spirit is at work in the midst of our groaning, and creation's groaning, and is making of them a perfect offering to the Father.

Is it hard to hold all this together? Sure! Do Christians tend to swing to extremes here? Yes. Some think that with enough faith we should be living in all the fullness of the kingdom now. Their Jesus is the Jesus of signs and wonders and resurrection

power. “Shine Jesus shine, fills this land with the Father’s glory!” might be their song. Others are deeply attuned to the reality of the world’s suffering, and are wary of false hope and triumphalism. Their Jesus is the suffering Jesus of the cross, the one who walks with us in our grief and shares our burdens. “Man of Sorrows, what a name, for the Son of God who came” could be their hymn.

Which is the true Jesus? Both! Is the kingdom now, or not yet? Yes! Should we pray for signs and wonders? Absolutely! Will God’s answer always be yes? No! Should we sing songs of triumphant praise, or psalms of honest lament? Yes and yes. Both ought to have a firm place in the song book for Middle-Time. Does the world need to see joy and hope and power in us? For sure. And they need to see that it is *in* our struggle and brokenness that Christ’s power is most profoundly revealed.

This moment in the great drama of God’s purposes is an amazing time, and a challenging time. This morning in communion we joyfully celebrate the “now” of our salvation in Christ. “This is the new covenant in my blood.” And at the same time, we name the deep longings provoked in us by the “not yet”:

*Glory to you, Lord Christ;
your death we show forth;
your resurrection we proclaim;
your coming we await;
Amen! Come Lord Jesus!*

Before the service continues, let’s take a minute or two to reflect on where you find yourself in this picture this morning ...

- Where do you connect with the groaning of creation and our world?
- Which “not yet” areas of life do you most long to see redeemed and healed?
Know that the Spirit groans with you in these things, and presents your groaning to the Father as prayer.
- What aspects of the “big story” of Scripture excite you most?
- Where is your hope anchored?
Let this be a source of thanks and praise!