God's Homecoming (Acts 3:21; Isaiah 65:17-25; Revelation 21:1-5; 22:20; John 14:18-28)

If you asked a random person, inside or outside the church: 'what is the goal of Christianity?' Many people might say: "To go to heaven when you die." This belief rests on an assumption that humans have something called a soul separate from our bodies, which will continue existing after our death in a spiritual state of bliss (or an unpleasant alternative). So it might surprise some that this belief is not at all what the story of the Bible communicates.

We often talk here about Good News, not as evacuation but transformation. Unfortunately, in our hymns and teaching to children, we often reinforce the "going-to-heaven" story. Think of hymns like "How Great Thou Art" with lines such as "When Christ shall come, with shout of acclamation, and take me home…" So close. The "take me home" instinct in our hymns, and kids teaching and at funerals, speaks of a true longing for home, but one that is pointed in a slightly wrong direction. As Josh said in his "Preparing to Go Home" sermon, home is not a place, but a mutual indwelling "in" God, now and eternally, which nothing can separate us from. So, my sermon today is going to tackle this common misunderstanding head on.

"Heaven-coming-to-Earth" not "Going-to-Heaven" story

So what is the story of Scripture if not a "going-to-heaven" story? The witness of Scripture, both the Old Testament and the New, is of an expectation and longing for God's universal reign and presence to fill the earth. From the first pages beginning in the Garden, the calling and commission of humanity was to extend and expand the overlapping realms of heaven and earth. The prophets envisioned a future time when "the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." A renewed heavens *and* earth as we heard in Isaiah. It is a vision of peace, reconciliation, restoration.

Then we come to the Gospels, with Jesus announcing that the Kingdom of God has arrived. When John the Baptist asks if Jesus is "the one who is to come?", Jesus points to the signs: the blind see, the lame walk, the dead are raised, and the poor hear good news. All of it is Isaiah's expectation, arriving on earth. Jesus sends his disciples out with the same message, to heal the sick and declare the Kingdom has come and he teaches us to pray it: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven."

In our gospel reading, we hear Jesus say, I am going away, but I am coming back. This coming refers to God's coming to us by the Holy Spirit, "we will come to them and make our home with them" (Jn 14:23), and also the final "coming back." John blurs resurrection, the Spirit coming upon the Church and the final return of Christ as phases of the one coming. The "many rooms" that Jesus goes to prepare is the dwelling of God by the Spirit in the community of believers.

Now we are in a period of time where, as Peter says in Acts 3:21: Jesus remains in heaven until the time comes for God to come and restore all things. Our hopeful vision remains the same as the one in

the Old Testament – a new heaven-earth reality, where in the words of Revelation 20, "God's dwelling place is now among people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God." Scripture close with a promise of Jesus: "Yes, I am coming soon." And a prayerful response: "Amen, Come, Lord Jesus." This is the story of our faith: God has come to his home and brought his reign, God is coming home through us by the Spirit, and God will return for good. The gospel is all about the homecoming of God. If this is new, and you're wondering about those you've lost, hold that thought, I'll come back to it.

How we lost the story

So how did we get from the Scriptural story of "Heaven-coming-to-Earth" to a "Going-to-Heaven" story? It helps to know where ideas come from, so here's a very brief history. Most of it comes from N. T. Wright's book *God's Homecoming*, which is where this sermon gets its name, if you'd like to go deeper.

Firstly, Scripture largely does not think of the human person having a soul that is a separate thing from the body. In both the Hebrew *nephesh* and Greek *psychē* words that might sometimes be translated as soul refer to the life of the whole living creature. Our spirit, breath, life, wairua. Only twice is *psychē* used in Revelation to refer to a disembodied departed soul: the souls of martyrs who are told to rest and wait a little longer until the resurrection. Nor does Scripture say that humans inherently have an immortal aspect of our being. 1 Tim 6:16: God alone is immortal. For humans, immortality is a gift bestowed upon us at the resurrection, not inherently possessed (1 Cor 15:53).

So where did these ideas come from? Mostly from the Greek world. As Christianity spread beyond the poor and marginalised to the educated, Christian thinkers had to defend the faith in the marketplace of ideas. And the dominant view among philosophers of what a human is came from Plato: a pre-existent immortal soul placed in a body whose home is somewhere called heaven. Paul got a taste of this in Athens, where some sneered at the resurrection (Acts 17:32). Why would you want a body? So apologists like Clement, Origen and later Augustine reached for Plato's language to make the faith credible. It wasn't only Greek thought, either. Wright notes that by the 3rd century many Judeans had also given up hope that God would bring his kingdom to earth, and Christians were in conversation with that too. Resurrection stayed in the creeds but slipped out of focus, and by the Middle Ages we had a detailed and very graphic afterlife of heaven and hell, with purgatory added for good measure.

Two Modern Heirs

Now, most of us don't live our lives thinking about ancient Greek metaphysics. But seventeen hundred years downstream of these influences, its effects are all around us, not least in our politics. In the absence of good teaching on God's homecoming, two stories have filled the gap.

The first is evacuation: the world is a doomed stage to escape. An extreme version is the strand of end-times thinking that treats wars in the Middle East as prophecy being fulfilled. Earlier this year a watchdog group reported over 200 complaints from US service members, alleging that commanders told troops the Iran war was part of a plan to trigger Armageddon. This apocalyptic thinking—that it's all going to burn—takes no responsibility for the future of creation. The Christian answer is that the kingdom comes another way, through mercy, purity and peace, not violence.

The second is self-made utopias of all varieties: what you get when the earthly hope survives but the arrival of God drops out. It's the kingdom without the King. Coming in many different political flavours, the myth of progress and the utopian visions say the future is delivered by human effort. And when it isn't delivering on its promises, the word "future" starts to produce anxiety, especially in young people. Scripture critiques both these stories. That God both cares deeply about this creation, and also that every attempt at utopia will fall short.

So what? Christian Ethics flows from good eschatology

Now, you might be wondering, so what? Isn't this all just speculative and pointless? I don't think so. How we understand our hope shapes how we live and work now. To paraphrase N. T. Wright, if we are not saved from the present world but for it, called to be part of the project of restoration, then we are custodians of God's home, and given the Spirit to be and expand the overlap between earth and heaven! That matters for how we steward creation and for the world we leave to the next generation.

After discussing at length the resurrection and the state of our resurrected bodies, in 1 Cor 15:58 Paul writes, "Always excel in the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain." What we do now is not wasted. We resist the temptation of escapism because our hope in God's Homecoming empowers us to enter into solidarity with the groaning of all creation (Rom 8:22), and to persist, knowing that it is not in vain. The hope of God's Homecoming motivates us to make and keep flourishing lives and resist all that diminishes us.

We also resist believing that it is all on us, that we are going to achieve some utopia by human effort alone. "Come, Lord Jesus": we work and pray for a reality we can't produce, so it isn't all on us. We work for God's transformed world, but we are not the architects of the kingdom. Its ultimate arrival rests on nothing but the sovereign grace of God. We are simply called to look for parables of the coming reign of God, signs of the Spirit at work and partner with them. This enables us to critique political visions and promises of utopia—we will always insist on a greater future than what is ever achievable by human effort. An important reminder a week after the election, as so many people put their hopes in political parties to bring about utopia. But also, to persist in working for the kingdom, even when others give up the task as hopeless.

Here's a parable. A family are preparing to move into a new house. Before the move, the parents go away for the weekend, and the teenage children throw a riotous party. The parents are aware that they are coming home to an absolute mess of a house. As a parent, which would they appreciate more: A scenario where the kids make some effort to get things into shape, even if they couldn't finish the job, and even some of their efforts made things worse. Or children who simply shrug and say, "well, we're moving house anyway right?" So, we do our best for the Kingdom, our effort and intent matters. But we're not so presumptuous that this or that will actually bring the fullness of the Kingdom of God.

The Spirit as the foretaste

We live in the already and not yet. Already: Jesus said we're not left as orphans. The Spirit he promised has made a home in us and we are held in love. So, what happens at death? That same Spirit doesn't leave us at death. Whatever we want to call that time between death and resurrection, we aren't abandoned in it. Whether we call that heaven, or paradise, the point is the love of God will not let us go. For those of us who have lost loved ones, we might be comforted by the thought of them being in heaven. We can be confident that they are with God, because of Christ's work on the cross, and the same Spirit who lives in us now holds our spirits through life and death, until the day God raises us in new life. That's why Paul calls the Spirit a foretaste and guarantee of the life to come (Eph 1:13-14).

But until that day, either our last day, or that final Great Day, there will remain a 'not yetness' to our existence. A time of partial incompleteness, of restlessness and longing that Augustine identified. Or in Karl Rahner's poetic framing, "*in this life, all symphonies remain unfinished."* The ache of this can drive us to personal escapism of mindless fantasies, or overwork trying to achieve the good life here by human effort. However, the ache of the unfinished symphonies should both drive us into deeper communion with God, and also deeper into relationship with one another. Into communities known for caring about the world being put right at every level, and for celebrating its truth, beauty and goodness in creation, art, music and every other way, bringing healing to creation.

Come Lord Jesus

I mentioned *How Great Thou* Art earlier. I thought it would be good to sing it now, with Wright's recommended lyric change: not us being taken home, but the whole world being healed when he comes. Pay attention to the last verse for the lyric change.

And so, we are empowered to work for the Kingdom Come on earth. But ultimately our hope is in God's Homecoming. Our prayer remains the same as the early church's: "Come, Lord Jesus."

Let's pray.