
Poised Between Heaven and Earth

Isaiah 65.17-23

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on November 14, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I want to tell you about the biggest theological challenge I've faced in ministry. Fourteen years ago I applied to be the pastor of a small church on a housing project in Norwich, a city of around 130,000 people a hundred miles north-east of London. Norwich was England's second city in the seventeenth century, when the wealth of the wool trade brought it a church for every week of the year and a pub for every day. But the church where I was seeking to become pastor was rather different. Its membership numbered around 25 and the neighborhood it served was the most materially disadvantaged in the east of England. I was excited to be invited to meet the bishop to discuss the position. I later discovered I was the only applicant for the job. The bishop said to me, with disarming frankness, "Why does a person with a Ph.D. want a job like this?" I replied, "Because I want to see Jesus and to discover the kingdom of God."

I grew up in the church at a time when being radical was easy. Margaret Thatcher was embarking on a series of austerity measures that reduced investment in welfare and public services. There were riots in major cities, and the Church of England produced a report called *Faith in the City* which was critical of the government's neglect of the urban poor. And then Prime Minister Thatcher defined the era by making her most notorious remark, "There is no such thing as society." You could think yourself radical just by being against Mrs Thatcher.

But by the time I moved to Norwich 15 years later there was a new government and a new philosophy. In 1998 Tony Blair announced that 17 socially disadvantaged areas would be identified and \$55 million would be made available to each one if its local residents could organize themselves into a board and committees to run their own regeneration. It turned out my neighborhood was identified as one of the 17. So I found myself taking on a new unpaid additional job as a community organizer and helping to lead a mass democratic regeneration movement for the next 5 years. We eventually formed the first development trust in the Eastern region and set about doing community surveys and elections and generally poking our fingers into everything.

And this was the moment when I felt overwhelmed by the biggest theological challenge I've had in ministry. Imagine you're faced with a significant level of social deprivation, and you have pretty much all the money you could dream of to do something about it. You can't blame the government, because they've given you all the help you could ask for. What do you do? Put another way, here is an underclass neighborhood. It's widely seen around the city and region as a dangerous place that's a drain on more comfortable suburbs and hard-working taxpayers and productive businesses. What would redemption *look* like for such a community? Should you strive to make it look as much like one of the more affluent middle-class suburbs as possible? Is it distinctive only for what it's not, or is there an elixir of life at the heart of the neighborhood around which can cluster a whole host of initiatives and green shoots of regeneration?

I struggled with that question all through those years – and I've struggled with it ever since. I went to live in the neighborhood and I got involved in the regeneration process because I wanted to be with people in their sorrows and struggles, and find beauty and abundance where some might only see shame and scarcity. But then I had to allow my imagination to be stretched to a vision of what it might mean for this community genuinely to flourish, to be happy and settled and at peace with itself. And that was somehow harder.

When the prophets of the Old Testament talked about regeneration and social hope they tended to do it in one of two ways. One way, favored by the book of Zechariah, was to long for political restoration, to put King David back on the throne and to have Israel king among the nations once again. The other way, portrayed by the book of Daniel, was to imagine a dramatic apocalyptic intervention of God that brought history to an end. You could call the first way earth and the second way heaven. Zechariah's way appealed to an activist spirit; the main drawback was that it was so much about Israel taking its destiny into its own hands that it didn't

leave much room for faith in God's action. Daniel's way was all about God's action, but so much so that it encouraged a passive resignation amongst the people. Little has changed. Those who talk about salvation today tend to be either those who assume it comes from us so get off your backside or those who assume it all comes from God so you might as well stay on your backside.

And that's the context that explains why the vision of Isaiah chapter 65 is so significant and so compelling. It's about God's action. It talks about "new heavens and a new earth" – so it's obviously about the dramatic and decisive intervention of God. But its details are about children's wellbeing, people building houses and growing crops – things as practical and mundane as a local county commissioner's electoral platform. What's breathtaking about the picture offered in Isaiah 65 is that it's *poised between heaven and earth* – poised between God's action and human action, poised between hope and pragmatism, poised between astonished wonder and hard-won realism, poised between the unknown future and the very ordinary present tense.

Let's look a little more closely at the way Isaiah combines a vision of God and humanity, with each playing its full role in redemption. There are three dimensions to salvation in this description – three answers, if you like, to my question back in Norwich, my question about what it made sense to hope for. The first is about health and wellbeing. "No more shall there be ... an infant that lives but a few days," it says, "or an old person who does not live out a lifetime." You always have to remember that in the Bible salvation and health are the same thing. Salvation means safety, and permanent relationship with God. If you're here this morning anxious about your own health or the health of someone you love, you'll understand exactly how closely salvation and health are connected. You want salvation to make you better. Of course you do.

The second dimension is security – that when you build a house you get to live in it, and when you plant vineyards you get to enjoy their fruit. Two and half thousand years before Karl Marx, Isaiah offers a manifesto for an alternative to slavery or indentured labor or oppressive social structures. Here's a picture of a happy, productive world where everyone gets to make and grow and enjoy and no one has to be exploited or used or alienated. Isaiah assumes it's good to work. This isn't a picture of angels playing harps. Work is at the heart of earth and heaven. There's no better feeling in life than to have good work to do, and to share in doing it with trusted and respected colleagues. Work is at the center of how human beings turn earth into heaven and bring heaven to earth, blending the gifts of God with the labor of human hands. Just imagine being able to work knowing that your conditions of work would be fertile and all your labors would be fruitful. Isn't that inspiring and energizing? Wouldn't that be a meeting of heaven and earth?

And the third dimension is about the relationship to the soil, to food, and to the animals. We get this evocative picture: "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox." The message here is that the wider relationships that make human habitation possible are not fundamentally conflictual. Isaiah goes on, "They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord." This is the biggest philosophical claim in the whole of Isaiah's vision. It's the promise that when heaven and earth meet there isn't war, but partnership; not battle, but beauty; not a contest for scarce resources, but an act of worship centered around the sharing of food. A Eucharist, perhaps.

So this is Isaiah's answer to my long heartsearching about what to hope for in a disadvantaged neighborhood. First, foster the right conditions for people's wellbeing. Salvation begins with health. Second, make possible constructive, rewarding and fruitful work, that people may discover the electric excitement of enjoying the work of their own hands. And third, heal relationships, between people and each other, people and animals, and people and the soil.

That's a pretty comprehensive manifesto. It's not otherworldly and out of touch. But it's not so down to earth that it's easily within reach. It's poised between heaven and earth. But it's missing one thing that's laced through Isaiah's vision. When I was helping to organize the housing project in Norwich, I would often be bewildered that there was no place for faith in our conversations. We would have big meetings with huge challenges, but we would never start with a prayer. That meant we were simply relying on our own strength.

We had squabbles about whose work was recognized in the media and celebrated in the community. But we had no way of talking about whose work most closely resembled God's kingdom. I found that work exhausting in a way I've never found church work exhausting, because we had no hands but our own to work with. But Isaiah infuses his vision with the presence of God. God is more intimately involved in redemption than the people themselves. God says, "Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear." Have you ever been understood like that? Isn't that the most thrilling description of God, as one who knows our thoughts and our interests and our flourishing better than we do, but lets us enjoy the work of our hands anyway? Most wonderfully of all, God says, "I am about to create Jerusalem as a *joy*, and its people as a *delight*. I will *rejoice* in Jerusalem, and *delight* in my people." Is there any feeling in heaven or earth more fabulous than to know that your life is God's delight? Isn't that the epitome of heaven – the discovery that God shapes his whole life for your flourishing – that God's joy is *you*?

I look back ten years and think, if I'd spent a little more time with Isaiah, I might have felt a clearer answer to my question. Bodily wellbeing, creative and fruitful labor, healthy interpersonal, political and environmental relationships: this really is a manifesto for any kind of people, however varied the realities or their economic or social circumstances. But now I see what I was struggling with wasn't fundamentally or specifically about poverty. It was about what we are each to hope for in this life, and what it means to strive for flourishing life in God's kingdom. I was trying to discover what it means to long for God's transformation, and yet take active small steps in the meantime to imitate the wellbeing, fruitfulness and harmony that only God can finally bring. In other words, what it means to be poised between heaven and earth.

How's Isaiah's vision working out for you right now? Are you healthy, and is your body at peace with itself? Is your work fruitful and are you able to enjoy the fruit of your hands? Are you at peace with your environment and are the wolf and the lamb in your life feeding together? And is your life one that makes God say, "You are my joy and delight"?

These are the things we long for for one another. When we wave a child off to college or get a Christmas letter from a friend or call a grandparent to get the latest news, these are the things we most deeply yearn to know. This was the closest I got to an answer to my question. Working out the specifics was a project we never completed together. But the experience of being near enough to see Isaiah's agenda but always knowing it to be out of reach is precisely to be poised between heaven and earth, to live in God's grace but always to hope in God's promise.

I have two friends who've known each other for 30 years and meet up for a weekend about once a year. As soon as they see each other after many months apart, they always ask each other the same question: "Are you living well?" It's a question about a sound body, fruitful work, healthy relationships, and a life lived in God's joy. Maybe that's the question I should have been asking back in Norwich on that housing project. Maybe that's the question Isaiah has for each one of us today, rich or poor, hopeful or fearful, flourishing or struggling. Maybe Isaiah is saying to you, right now, "Are you living well? Are you poised between heaven and earth?"