

12. RETHINKING SALVATION: HEAVEN, EARTH, AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD

INTRODUCTION

We have now reached the point where we must ask: So what? Is all this talk about God's ultimate future, about "life after life after death," simply a matter of tidying up our beliefs about what will happen in the very end, or does it have any practical consequences here and now? Is it simply a matter of getting our teaching and preaching right and of ordering our funerals and other liturgies so that they reflect biblical teaching about death and what lies beyond instead of nonbiblical and even antibiblical ideas that have crept into the church here and there?

Let me approach this question obliquely. Among the objections that are regularly raised to believing in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, I recently came across a remarkable one that shows, it seems to me, a total misunderstanding of what Christianity is all about. One of the leading American writers on early Christianity, Dominic Crossan, has asked on a number of occasions: Even if Jesus did rise from the dead, so what? Very nice for him, but what's it got to do with anything else? Why should he be so specially favored? If God can pull off a stunt like that, why can't he intervene and do a lot more useful things like stopping genocide or earthquakes?¹ And this objection chimes in with things that have been said, for instance, by my distinguished predecessor Bishop David Jenkins, constituting

what you might call the moral objection (as opposed to the historical or scientific one) to believing in Jesus's bodily resurrection.

I don't want to comment here on the objection itself—though we may note that when historians start to make arguments about what happened on the grounds of what ought (or ought not) to have happened, they put themselves on very thin ice indeed. What I want to do, rather, is to show what the New Testament says by way of answer to the question, What's the resurrection of Jesus got to do with anything else? and to point to some conclusions from this for the life of the church and of Christians today.²

Part of the energy for this undertaking comes from two further observations, this time about the way we keep Easter in the contemporary church. (The church I know best is the Church of England, but conversations with friends in other churches indicate that similar phenomena can be found in plenty of other churches too.)

A good many Easter hymns start by assuming that the point of Easter is that it proves the existence of life after death and encourages us to hope for it. This is then regularly, but ironically, combined with a view of that life after death in which the specific element of resurrection has been quietly removed. "May we go where he is gone," we sing at the end of one well-known hymn, "rest and reign with him in heaven!" But that is precisely *not* the point that the New Testament draws from Jesus's resurrection. Yes, there is a promised rest after the labors of this life, and the word *heaven* may be an appropriate, though vague, way of denoting where this rest takes place. But this time of rest is the prelude to something very different, which will emphatically involve earth as well. Earth—the renewed earth—is where the reign will take place, which is why the New Testament regularly speaks not of our going to be where Jesus is but of his coming to where we are, as we saw in the previous part of the book.

But even when we become more precise and focused about what the New Testament says about our own future hope—the final resurrection itself and whatever intermediate state may precede it,

which we discussed in chapters 10 and 11—this is still, maybe to our surprise, not what the New Testament sees as the main result of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Yes, that resurrection does indeed give us a sure and certain hope. If that's not the case, we are of all people, as Paul says, most to be pitied.³ But when the New Testament strikes the great Easter bell, the main resonances it sets up are not simply about ourselves and about whatever future world God is ultimately going to make, when heaven and earth are joined together and renewed at last from top to bottom. Precisely because the resurrection has happened as an event *within our own world*, its implications and effects are to be felt within our own world, here and now.

This is one of the points at which it simply won't do to say (as, according to various opinion polls, a lot of clergy and even some bishops are inclined to say) that believing in the bodily resurrection of Jesus is a take-it-or-leave-it option. Jesus's bodily resurrection marks a watershed. It may look like only a few steps this way or that to move from one side to the other, but if you accept the bodily resurrection of Jesus all the streams flow in one direction, and if you don't they all flow in the other direction. And, to put it kindly but bluntly, if you go in the other direction, away from the bodily resurrection, you may be left with something that looks a bit like Christianity, but it won't be what the New Testament writers were talking about. Please note, this is not at all a matter of putting a check beside some dogmas and not others, with the resurrection simply being a rather more difficult box to check off than some others. It is a matter of a belief that is a symptom of an entire worldview, an accurate index to a way of looking at everything else.

The point of this final section of the book is that a proper grasp of the (surprising) *future* hope held out to us in Jesus Christ leads directly and, to many people, equally surprisingly, to a vision of the *present* hope that is the basis of all Christian mission. To hope for a better future in this world—for the poor, the sick, the lonely and depressed, for the slaves, the refugees, the hungry and homeless, for

the abused, the paranoid, the downtrodden and despairing, and in fact for the whole wide, wonderful, and wounded world—is not something *else*, something extra, something tacked on to the gospel as an afterthought. And to work for that intermediate hope, the surprising hope that comes forward from God’s ultimate future into God’s urgent present, is not a *distraction from* the task of mission and evangelism in the present. It is a central, essential, vital, and life-giving part of it. Mostly, Jesus himself got a hearing from his contemporaries because of what he was *doing*. They saw him saving people from sickness and death, and they heard him talking about a salvation, the message for which they had longed, that would go beyond the immediate into the ultimate future. But the two were not unrelated, the present one a mere visual aid of the future one or a trick to gain people’s attention. The whole point of what Jesus was up to was that he was doing, close up, in the present, what he was promising long-term, in the future. And what he was promising for that future, and doing in that present, was not saving souls for a disembodied eternity but rescuing people from the corruption and decay of the way the world presently is so they could enjoy, already in the present, that renewal of creation which is God’s ultimate purpose—and so they could thus become colleagues and partners in that larger project.

When we turn to Paul, the verse that has always struck me in this connection is 1 Corinthians 15:58. Paul, we remind ourselves, has just written the longest and densest chapter in any of his letters, discussing the future resurrection of the body in great and complex detail. How might we expect him to finish such a chapter? By saying, “Therefore, since you have such a great hope, sit back and relax because you know God’s got a great future in store for you”? No. Instead, he says, “Therefore, my beloved ones, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.”

What does he mean? How does believing in the future resurrection lead to getting on with the work in the present? Quite straight-

forwardly. The point of the resurrection, as Paul has been arguing throughout the letter, is that *the present bodily life is not valueless just because it will die*. God will raise it to new life. What you do with your body in the present matters because God has a great future in store for it. And if this applies to ethics, as in 1 Corinthians 6, it certainly also applies to the various vocations to which God's people are called. What you *do* in the present—by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself—*will last into God's future*. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether (as the hymn so mistakenly puts it, “Until that day when all the blest to endless rest are called away”). They are part of what we may call *building for God's kingdom*.

I shall come back to the meaning of “God's kingdom” presently. But let us note, at the outset of this final section of the book, that the promise of new creation—the promise we have been studying throughout this book—is not and cannot be simply about straightening out ideas about life after death. It is about the mission of the church. There has been a lot of talk where I work about a “mission-shaped church,” following a report with that title, urging today's church to regard mission not as an extra, something to fit in if there's any time left over from other concerns, but as the central and shaping dynamic of its life.⁴ But if this is to mean what it ought to mean, we must also reshape our ideas of mission itself. It's no good falling back into the tired old split-level world where some people believe in evangelism in terms of saving souls for a timeless eternity and other people believe in mission in terms of working for justice, peace, and hope in the present world. That great divide has nothing to do with Jesus and the New Testament and everything to do with the silent enslavement of many Christians (both conservative and radical) to the Platonic ideology of the Enlightenment. Once we get the resurrection straight, we can and must get mission straight. If we want

a mission-shaped church, what we need is a hope-shaped mission. And if that is surprising, we ought to be getting used to it by now.

We begin with one of the largest topics of all, which most Christians take for granted but which is in urgent need of a radical rethink: salvation.

THE MEANING OF SALVATION

The truly exciting, surprising, and perhaps frightening thing about where we have now got to in this book is that we are now forced to rethink the very meaning of salvation itself.

Mention salvation, and almost all Western Christians assume that you mean going to heaven when you die. But a moment's thought, in the light of all we have said so far, reveals that this simply cannot be right. Salvation means, of course, rescue. But what are we ultimately to be rescued from? The obvious answer is death. But if, when we die, all that happens is that our bodies decompose while our souls (or whatever other word we want to use for our continuing existence) go on elsewhere, this doesn't mean we've been *rescued from* death. It simply means that we've died.

And if God's good creation—of the world, of life as we know it, of our glorious and remarkable bodies, brains, and bloodstreams—really *is* good, and if God wants to reaffirm that goodness in a wonderful act of new creation at the last, then to see the death of the body and the escape of the soul as salvation is not simply slightly off course, in need of a few subtle alterations and modifications. It is totally and utterly wrong. It is colluding with death. It is conniving at death's destruction of God's good, image-bearing human creatures while consoling ourselves with the (essentially non-Christian and non-Jewish) thought that the really important bit of ourselves is saved from this wicked, nasty body and this sad, dark world of space, time, and matter! As we have seen, the whole of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, speaks out against such nonsense. *It*

is, however, what most Western Christians, including most Bible Christians of whatever sort, actually believe. This is a serious state of affairs, reinforced not only in popular teaching but also in liturgies, public prayers, hymns, and homilies of every kind.

All this was borne in on me recently when I read a popular-level book by the well-known Christian writer Adrian Plass. Plass doesn't claim to be a profound theologian, though actually his great contribution, through humor, irony, and the occasional deeply poignant story, is often to make us think afresh about things we take for granted. So when someone gave me his new book, *Bacon Sandwiches and Salvation*, I looked forward to more of the same. And I wasn't disappointed: the book is funny, shrewd, deliberately silly, and deliberately serious.⁵

When it came to the most serious bit, on salvation itself, I was looking forward to some fresh thinking. Plass himself raises the questions that puzzle many people today:

But what is it all about? What does it mean to be saved? Saved from what? Saved *for* what? Should the whole business of salvation have a significant impact on my present as well as on my future? Speaking of the future, what can we expect from an eternity spent in heaven? How can we possibly make sense of heaven when our feet remain so solidly on Earth? Where is the interface, the meeting point between the flesh and the Spirit? And when all the strange religious terms and voices and patterns and mantras and man-made conventions have faded away, what will be left?⁶

Well, quite. That is indeed the puzzle we found in the early chapters of the present book. I turned the page, eager to see what Plass would come up with as a fresh statement of salvation. But I was disappointed:

[God's] plan was for us to live in perfect harmony with him. . . .
Then something went horribly, dreadfully wrong. . . . This truly

ghastly thing that happened somehow separated human beings from God, who nevertheless continued to love them/us with a passion that is impossible to comprehend. Desperate to heal the rift, he devised a rescue plan. . . . Because Jesus was executed on the cross it is now possible for any or all of us, through repentance, baptism and obedience, *to recover the magnificent relationship with God* that was destroyed in days gone by. . . . If you and I accept the death and resurrection of Jesus as a living, divine, working mechanism in our own lives *we shall one day go home to God and find peace*. . . . The Holy Spirit, sent by Jesus himself after his death, offers support and strength for those who call on him.⁷

Now I know it is hardly fair to take on Adrian Plass in a book like this. He does not claim to be writing a work of theology, and as I said, his book has many wonderful insights (as well as many corny jokes). I cite him simply as a classic example—all the more powerful because at this point he is so clearly articulating what so many take for granted—of the normal Western Christian view: that salvation is about “my relationship with God” in the present and about “going home to God and finding peace” in the future. The fact that, though asking so many probing questions and clearly being dissatisfied with the stock answers he has received, he has not thought to question these answers themselves shows how deeply rooted they are in an entire tradition. Those of us who have known this tradition all our lives—not just an evangelical tradition, by the way, but at this point the entire tradition of the Western church—will recognize his summary as being what most Christians believe and, indeed, what most non-Christians assume Christians believe. And, to make the point once more as forcibly as I can, this belief is simply not what the New Testament teaches.

The day after writing this paragraph I had another, and sharply personal, example of the same problem. An anguished e-mail appeared from the man who is translating my book *Judas and the Gospel of Jesus* into one of the Balkan languages. He had just got to the

point where I was warning that some Western Christians have embraced something worryingly similar to second-century Gnosticism when they think of the present world as evil and the only solution being to escape it and to go to heaven instead. This produced a tirade of accusations from the translator, for whom that seemed to be precisely what he thought the gospel was all about. Hadn't I read the Bible? Didn't I believe in heaven? Or in Jesus? Was I trying to invent a new religion?

Thus far, I am simply rubbing in the point I have been making throughout the book. But in this closing section we have to look head-on at the problem that directly results from this widespread misperception of the Christian view of salvation. As long as we see salvation in terms of going to heaven when we die, the main work of the church is bound to be seen in terms of saving souls for that future. But when we see salvation, as the New Testament sees it, in terms of God's promised new heavens and new earth and of our promised resurrection to share in that new and gloriously embodied reality—what I have called life after life after death—then the main work of the church here and now demands to be rethought in consequence.

At this point the well-known slogan of Christian Aid, "We Believe in Life Before Death," comes into its own. Life *before* death is what is threatened, called into question, by the idea that salvation is merely life *after* death. If we're heading for a timeless, bodiless eternity, then what's the fuss about putting things right in the present world? But if what matters is the newly embodied life *after* life after death, then the presently embodied life *before* death can at last be seen not as an interesting but ultimately irrelevant present preoccupation, not simply as a "vale of tears and soul-making" through which we have to pass to a blessed and disembodied final state, but as the essential, vital time, place, and matter into which God's future purposes have already broken in the resurrection of Jesus and in which those future purposes are now to be further anticipated through the mission of the church. Life after death, it seems, can be

a serious distraction not only from the ultimate life *after* life after death, but also from life *before* death. To ignore this is in fact to conclude not only with death but also with all sorts of other powers that gain their force from their own alliance with that ultimate enemy.

Salvation, then, is not “going to heaven” but “being raised to life in God’s new heaven and new earth.” But as soon as we put it like this we realize that the New Testament is full of hints, indications, and downright assertions that this salvation isn’t just something we have to wait for in the long-distance future. We can enjoy it here and now (always partially, of course, since we all still have to die), genuinely anticipating in the present what is to come in the future. “We were saved,” says Paul in Romans 8:24, “in hope.” The verb “we were saved” indicates a past action, something that has already taken place, referring obviously to the complex of faith and baptism of which Paul has been speaking in the letter so far. But this remains “in hope” because we still look forward to the ultimate future salvation of which he speaks in (for instance) Romans 5:9, 10.

This explains at a stroke the otherwise puzzling fact that the New Testament often refers to salvation and being saved in terms of bodily events within the present world. “Come and save my daughter,” begs Jairus; as Jesus is on his way to do so, the woman with the issue of blood thinks to herself, “If I can only touch his clothes I will be saved”; “Daughter,” says Jesus to her after her healing, “your faith has saved you.”⁸ Matthew, telling the same story, abbreviates it drastically, but at this point he adds an extra note: “And the woman was saved from that moment on.”⁹ It is fascinating to see how passages like this—and there are many of them—are often juxtaposed with others that speak of salvation in larger terms, seeming to go beyond present physical healing or rescue. This juxtaposition makes some Christians nervous (surely, they think, salvation ought to be a *spiritual* matter!), but it doesn’t seem to have troubled the early church at all.¹⁰ For the first Christians, the ultimate salvation was all about God’s new world, and the point of what Jesus and the apostles were doing when they were healing people or being rescued from ship-

wreck or whatever was that this was a proper anticipation of that ultimate salvation, that healing transformation of space, time, and matter. The future rescue that God had planned and promised was starting to come true in the present. We are saved not as souls but as wholes.

(All sorts of things follow from this. We might notice, for instance, that theories of atonement, of the meaning of the cross, are not simply a set of alternative answers to the same question. They give the answers they give because of the question they ask. If the question is, How can I get to heaven despite the sin because of which I deserve to be punished? the answer may well be, Because Jesus has been punished in your place. But if the question is, How can God's plan to rescue and renew the entire world go ahead despite the corruption and decay that have come about because of human rebellion? the answer may well be, Because on the cross Jesus defeated the powers of evil, which have enslaved rebel humans and so ensured continuing corruption. Please note, *these and other possible questions and answers are not mutually exclusive*. My point is that reframing the question will mean rethinking the various answers we might give and the relationship between them. This is a large topic for another occasion.)¹¹

But as soon as we grasp this—and I appreciate it takes quite a bit of latching onto for people who have spent their whole lives thinking the other way—we see that if salvation is that sort of thing, it can't be confined to human beings. When human beings are saved, in the past as a single coming-to-faith event, in the present through acts of healing and rescue, including answers to the prayer "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil," and in the future when they are finally raised from the dead, this is always so that they can be genuine human beings in a fuller sense than they otherwise would have been. And genuine human beings, from Genesis 1 onward, are given the mandate of looking after creation, of bringing order to God's world, of establishing and maintaining communities. To suppose that we are saved, as it were, for our own private

benefit, for the restoration of our own relationship with God (vital though that is!), and for our eventual homecoming and peace in heaven (misleading though that is!) is like a boy being given a baseball bat as a present and insisting that since it belongs to him, he must always and only play with it in private. But of course you can only do what you're meant to do with a baseball bat when you're playing with other people. And salvation only does what it's meant to do when those who have been saved, are being saved, and will one day fully be saved realize that they are saved not as souls but as wholes and not for themselves alone but for what God now longs to do through them.

The point is this. When God saves people in this life, by working through his Spirit to bring them to faith and by leading them to follow Jesus in discipleship, prayer, holiness, hope, and love, such people are designed—it isn't too strong a word—to be a sign and foretaste of what God wants to do for the entire cosmos. What's more, such people are not just to be a sign and foretaste of that ultimate salvation; they are to be *part of the means by which* God makes this happen in both the present and the future. That is what Paul insists on when he says that the whole creation is waiting with eager longing not just for its own redemption, its liberation from corruption and decay, but *for God's children to be revealed*: in other words, for the unveiling of those redeemed humans through whose stewardship creation will at last be brought back into that wise order for which it was made.¹² And since Paul makes it quite clear that those who believe in Jesus Christ, who are incorporated into him through baptism, are already God's children, are already themselves saved, this stewardship cannot be something to be postponed for the ultimate future. It must begin here and now.

In other words—to sum up where we've got so far—the work of salvation, in its full sense, is (1) about whole human beings, not merely souls; (2) about the present, not simply the future; and (3) about what God does *through* us, not merely what God does *in and for* us. If we can get this straight, we will rediscover the historic basis

for the full-orbed mission of the church. To pursue this further, we need to look at the larger picture within which all this makes sense: the kingdom of God.

THE KINGDOM OF GOD

We have seen at several points in this book that the normal Christian understanding of kingdom, especially of kingdom of heaven, is simply mistaken. “God’s kingdom” and “kingdom of heaven” mean the same thing: the sovereign rule of God (that is, the rule of heaven, of the one who lives in heaven), which according to Jesus was and is breaking in to the present world, to earth. That is what Jesus taught us to pray for. We have no right to omit that clause from the Lord’s Prayer or to suppose that it doesn’t really mean what it says.

This, as we have seen, is what the resurrection and ascension of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit are all about. They are designed not to take us away from this earth but rather to make us agents of the transformation of this earth, anticipating the day when, as we are promised, “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.” When the risen Jesus appears to his followers at the end of Matthew’s gospel, he declares that all authority in heaven *and on earth* has been given to him. When John the Seer hears the thundering voices in heaven, they are singing, “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he shall reign for ever and ever.”¹³ And the point of the gospels—of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John together with Acts—is that *this has already begun*.

The question of *how* it has begun—in what sense it is inaugurated, anticipated, or whatever—has been the stuff of debate for a long time. But part of the problem with that debate is that those taking part in it do not usually clarify the question of *what precisely it is* that is begun, launched, or initiated. At one level it is clearly the hope of Israel, as expressed in classic kingdom passages such as

Isaiah 52:7–12. There, “God becoming king at last” means the end of exile, the defeat of evil, and the return of Israel’s God to Zion. We can see all of that becoming the major theme not only of Jesus’s life and public career but also of his own interpretation of his death.¹⁴

But underneath that again, when we stand back, is the meaning of God’s kingdom, to which the hope of Israel was designed to contribute—or, to put it another way, the meaning because of which God called Israel in the first place. Faced with his beautiful and powerful creation in rebellion, God longed to set it right, to rescue it from continuing corruption and impending chaos and to bring it back into order and fruitfulness. God longed, in other words, to re-establish his wise sovereignty over the whole creation, which would mean a great act of healing and rescue. He did not want to rescue humans *from* creation any more than he wanted to rescue Israel *from* the Gentiles. He wanted to rescue Israel *in order that Israel might be a light to the Gentiles*, and he wanted thereby to rescue humans *in order that humans might be his rescuing stewards over creation*. That is the inner dynamic of the kingdom of God.

That, in other words, is how the God who made humans to be his stewards over creation and who called Israel to be the light of the world is to become king, in accordance with his original intention in creation, on the one hand, and his original intention in the covenant, on the other. To snatch saved souls away to a disembodied heaven would destroy the whole point. God is to become king of the whole world at last. And he will do this not by declaring that the inner dynamic of creation (that it be ruled by humans) was a mistake, nor by declaring that the inner dynamic of his covenant (that Israel would be the means of saving the nations) was a failure, but rather by fulfilling them both. That is more or less what Paul’s letter to the Romans is all about.¹⁵

This is the purpose that has been realized in Jesus Christ. One of the greatest problems of the Western church, ever since the Reformation at least, is that it hasn’t really known what the gospels were there for. Imagining that the point of Christianity was to enable

people to go to heaven, most Western Christians supposed that the mechanism by which this happened was the one they found in the writings of Paul (I stress, the one *they found*; I have argued elsewhere that this involved misunderstanding Paul as well) and that the four gospels were simply there to give backup information about Jesus, his teaching, his moral example, and his atoning death. This long tradition screened out the possibility that when Jesus spoke of God's kingdom, he was talking not about a heaven for which he was preparing his followers but about something that was happening in and on this earth, through his work, then through his death and resurrection, and then through the Spirit-led work to which they would be called.

Part of the difficulty people still have in coming to terms with the gospels, read in this way, is that *kingdom of God* has been a flag of convenience under which all sorts of ships have sailed. Some used the phrase as a cover for pursuing business of their own—programs of moral, social, or political improvement or upheaval, agendas of the left and the right, of the well-meaning but muddled and of the less well-meaning but all too clear. Many who went this route treated the gospels as though they were simply stories about Jesus going around helping people as best he could, with the unfortunate sequel of his untimely death. And many other Christians, seeing this shallow and confused exegesis and application, reacted angrily against what is called kingdom theology as though it were simply an out-dated and shallow corporate version of faddish self-help moralism. (This is a serious problem in some parts of America, where *kingdom* has become a slogan of this kind and has then been used to rule out or marginalize many aspects of orthodox Christian faith—precipitating among some would-be orthodox Christians a reaction against any social or political dimension to the gospel and against kingdom language altogether. By such means do we project our own confusions onto the text.)

But the fact that some people, and some movements, have misappropriated the kingdom theology of the gospels doesn't mean

there isn't a reality of which such ideas are a caricature. What we find in the gospels is much, much more profound. Here we meet again a familiar problem, the problem of how Jesus's initial ministry joins up with his self-giving to death. I have argued at length elsewhere that Jesus never imagined that the kingdom he was launching through his healings, feastings, and teachings would be fulfilled without his death. Or, to put it the other way around, I and others have stressed that Jesus's death was not (and he did not think it was) about something other than the kingdom work to which he had devoted his short public career. The problem of evil, which looms up as the backdrop to the gospels, is not going to be dealt with even by Jesus's healings, feastings, and teachings. It certainly won't be dealt with by his then providing his followers with a fast-track route to a distant and disembodied heaven. It can only be dealt with—the kingdom can only come on earth as in heaven—through Jesus's own death and resurrection. That is a whole other story, though of course a central and vital one.¹⁶

But when we reintegrate what should never have been separated—the kingdom-inaugurating public work of Jesus and his redemptive death and resurrection—we find that the gospels tell a different story. It isn't just a story of some splendid and exciting social work with an unhappy conclusion. Nor is it just a story of an atoning death with an extended introduction. It is something much bigger than the sum of those two diminished perspectives. It is the story of God's kingdom being launched on earth as in heaven, generating a new state of affairs in which the power of evil has been decisively defeated, the new creation has been decisively launched, and Jesus's followers have been commissioned and equipped to put that victory and that inaugurated new world into practice. Atonement, redemption, and salvation are what happen on the way because engaging in this work demands that people themselves be rescued from the powers that enslave the world in order that they can in turn be rescuers. To put it another way, if you want to help inaugurate God's kingdom, you must follow in the way of the cross, and if

you want to benefit from Jesus's saving death, you must become part of his kingdom project. There is only one Jesus, only one gospel story, albeit told in four kaleidoscopic patterns.¹⁷

Heaven's rule, God's rule, is thus to be put into practice in the world, resulting in salvation in both the present and the future, a salvation that is both *for* humans and, *through* saved humans, for the wider world. This is the solid basis for the mission of the church. But to explore this further will need another chapter.