

Mandorla: A New Heaven and a New Earth. (Rev. 21:1)

Whereas our modern culture understands the future in terms of never ending technological mastery of the world, Christianity has a different map for the future. That map is derived from an event in history that overturned the ordering of the world. The future comes to us, as it were, from this past event. The event in question is the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. This event is the hinge of history about which everything turns.

The Magnificat, or Song of Mary, illustrates this overturning after she hears that she will bear a son whose name will be Jesus.

And Mary said,
"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever." Luke 1:46-55)

Mary points to a coming transformation of the world not from above by the powerful, but from below, by a child born to an unwed mother in a stall for animals for whom no room could be found in civilized society. When the child Jesus was brought to the temple to be circumcised it was said of him that:

"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.." (Luke 2(34)

It is clear that the both the Old and New Testaments have a common understanding of the salvation that God brings in time. This may be described as the "two ages" model in which God acts to bring about a new age from the old. The genre of this transformation is called apocalyptic and its study is called eschatology (eschaton means end time). Many have mistakenly looked for a particular date in the future at which the world will end, the mountains melt and the seas evaporate and the faithful are taken up into heaven. This idea, present to this day, usually results in believers sitting on a mountain somewhere and waiting for it all to end followed by disappointment. Alternatively, a view made popular by the Left Behind books and TV series would have it that the end times are marked by the rapture when individual men and women will be assumed

into heaven. The problem with both of these views and many others of similar ilk is that the world is seen as of no importance. This view is dangerous because it produces a detachment from social and environmental reality that can only be damaging to both.

This is not eschatology in the biblical sense. Rather, eschatological time is not a point in the future but a continuing event that is now but not yet. The fulfilment of history, the *eschaton*, is even now breaking in upon us, as it were, in bits. We can see the signs of this when we see love overcoming hatred, when the poor are raised up, when the powerful are brought down and when peace breaks out among the nations.

A useful exercise that will establish the centrality of the two ages scheme in the New Testament would be to go to a [bible site](#) and search for “age”.

Old Testament eschatology gives rise to the New Testament variety. In the Old Testament “The Day of the Lord” may be a day of judgment and wrath or a day of salvation, depending of the situation in Israel that the prophet addressed. For example we read in Amos:

Alas for you who desire the day of the Lord!
Why do you want the day of the Lord?
It is darkness, not light;
as if someone fled from a lion,
and was met by a bear;
or went into the house and rested a hand against the wall,
and was bitten by a snake.
(Amos 5:17-19)

The prophetic word here addressed a nation who has forsaken its God; it was a word of warning. On the other hand, when Israel was brought low, as it was when it was taken into exile in Babylon, the word spoken by the prophet was of a joyful restoration:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
The leopard shall lie down with
the kid,
the calf and the lion and the
fatling together,
and a little child shall lead
them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down
together;
and the lion shall eat straw like
the ox.
The nursing child shall play over
the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put
its hand on the
adder’s den.

They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:6-9)

This is a vision in poetry of a healed earth. Similar texts refer to the healing of all society:

He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more. (Isaiah 2:4)

It is in Isaiah that we first hear about a new heavens and a new earth:

“For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.
But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,” (Isaiah 65:17)

The scheme of Old Testament salvation is wholly oriented to the saving of the nation Israel and the healing of the whole of creation. The exodus from slavery in Egypt, the occupation of the land of Canaan, the establishment of the temple in Jerusalem and the return from exile in Babylon are all variations on the theme of salvation. For the biblical mentality these event could only be achieved by God.

In the New Testament we find a continuation of the themes outlined in the Old both of the end time that is a time of destruction and wrath and a time of healing and the presence of God in the world. For example we hear Jesus saying before his crucifixion:

“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided:
father against son
and son against father,
mother against daughter
and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law
and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”(Luke 12:49-52)

Both the Old Testament and the New agree here, the old world must be destroyed before the new can come. There are shadows of the end of the world at the death of Jesus:

“It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun’s light failed; the curtain of the temple was torn in two.” Luke 23:44)

The tearing of the curtain that divided the sanctuary from the people is understood as the overcoming of the barrier between God and man. The moment of Jesus’ death is the moment when the barrier between God and men is torn apart.

The gospel according to John begins with a crucial statement that: “For God so loved the **world** that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

Thus the incarnation of the Son is predicated on the love of God for the *world*. The salvation that Jesus brings is not escape from the world but its redemption. The eternal life that is promised is life safe from the death dealing powers of the world that can kill the soul, the essence of life. “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” (John 17:3)

One of the themes of biblical eschatology is the raising of the dead as we see in the story of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37. Those who are attached to the old world of sin and death are the living dead. In the world to come, the healed world, these dead will be raised from their metaphorical graves and will live a life that is from God. As such it is a life that persists even in the face of the death of the body. It is eternal life because the eternal God gives it.

The following passage from John illustrates the two ages model of history in that the new age is the age in which “my Father will love them, and we (Father and Son) will come to them and make our home with them.” Salvation consists of God coming to us.

“I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?” Jesus answered him, “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me. (John 18-24)

The vision of the new creation is not understood as a quiet transformation from the old to the new. Between the old and the new is the agony of the birth pangs as Paul announces:

“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own

will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” (Rom 8:18-23)

This mirrors the sequence of death and resurrection of Jesus. The new life is born out of death as in the baptismal liturgy when the baptized are immersed in the waters of death before they rise to resurrection life in God. Indeed the whole life of the individual, when they take up the discipleship of Jesus, involves the little deaths of the self-seeking ego and the emergence of a new creation. Hence we hear from Paul:

“So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2cor 5:17)

In the New Testament the new age inaugurated by the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus is called the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. That this is an earthly reality is obvious from the earliest gospel we have, the gospel according to Mark;

“Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” Mark (1:14-15)

Jesus actions towards the sick are indicative of his inauguration of the kingdom. The following is a striking example.

“Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” But Jesus rebuked him, saying, “Be silent, and come out of him!” And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, “What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.” (Mark 1:23-27)

When the healing miracles of Jesus are understood as manifestations of the kingdom of God they take on a new life. They cease to be about a miraculous healing of a few blind, deaf, leprous and possessed and stand for a wider healing of humankind. The coming of Jesus is synonymous with the coming of the kingdom and the healing and renewal of the whole creation.

Finally, we will consider the text chosen for the Mandorla Art Prize 2018. This text confirms the above observations that Scripture is oriented towards a transformation of the world and its relationship to God.

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

See, the home of God is
among mortals.
He will dwell with them as
their God.
they will be his peoples,
and god himself will be
with them.
He will wipe every tear from
From their eyes.
Death will be no more;
Mourning and crying and pain
will be no more,
for the first things have
passed away." (Rev. 21:1-4)

It is remarkable that this vision of the fulfillment of history has been almost completely neglected in the art of the Christian West in favor of scenes of Christ enthroned as judge. Perhaps this Mandorla Prize will be an opportunity to tell another story, that of the fulfillment of the ages and the creation of a new earth and a new heaven.

Summary.

The New Testament refers to the experienced and awaited fulfillment of all things in terms of the establishment of the kingdom of God/Heaven. Rather than individual souls going to God, the scheme in the New Testament is that God comes to us in the form of Jesus of Nazareth. It is by his birth, life, death and resurrection that the kingdom of God/Heaven is established as a this-worldly redemption of all things both cultural and natural. This is a down to earth reality to do with the establishment of justice and peace in the world. It is not envisioned as taking place at one point in time but in all times and in tension with the present age of corruption. The kingdom of God exists despite the present suffering and injustice, despite the genocides and the despoiling of nature.

The rituals of the Church reflect this coming of the kingdom and the people who patiently await it. The Church is metaphorically the risen body of Christ alive in the world. It celebrates that reality during the Mass or Eucharist in which members of the body of Christ eat his body and drink his blood so that he will be in us and we in him. This meal is the sign of the present and coming kingdom in which all the inhabitants of the earth will feast. It is the eschatological meal.

Appendix.

I have said something about our understanding of time that has to be altered if we are to understand the concept of eschatology. An event has occurred in the past that continually effects the present. It may be said that that event in the past is still present in the present, as it were. But it is also true that the future is also present in the present, a more difficult concept. That event in the past was the event of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. In that event men and women

were judged. They had put to death the one sent by God. The resurrection represents the vindication of the one we put to death. The upshot of all of this is that the world had ended and the ruler of this world has been defeated, even though it did not know it. The death and resurrection of Jesus brought about the end of the world and the beginning of a new creation. So we have to deal with the fact that the world has already ended and that we live in a new age. We live in resurrection time in which all things will be made new. So we live in the time between the times, between the time of the death and resurrection of Jesus when the world ended and the time in which the new creation will be completed in the future. Our lives exist in the tension of the coming of the kingdom. That is why the primary virtue for Christians is patience.

It is apparent from this that the Church's view of the future is quite different from the secular view that a glorious future lies in wait for us courtesy of increased technological sophistication and dominance of nature. While we applaud technological advances, although waiting for the new iPhone has become a bit of a drag, it does nothing to give us a firm identity, a foundation from which we can understand our lives. It does nothing to heal family relationships, bring peace to nations, raise up the drug addled or comfort the grief stricken. The Mandorla theme for 2018 is directed to this new reality that we cannot bring about no matter how smart we are.

Further reading.

A New Heaven and a New Earth: Reclaiming Biblical Eschatology. J. Richard Middleton. Baker Academic, 2014.

Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology. Daniel L. Migliore Eerdmans 2014. Especially Chapter 5 The Good Creation.

Peter Sellick, Online Opinion [Preaching as though the world has already ended.](#) 2016