

What Future – Our Church ?!

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2. From ? to !

Introduction

One of the core problems about the way the church addresses the challenge of its future is that we make our decisions on the basis of certain assumptions about the church when these assumptions may in fact be questionable. For example, we assume that the church needs to respond to and address the needs of people; or that the church has to reach out to people; or that the church needs to be relevant to the cultural context in which and relevant to the people with whom it finds itself; or that the church needs to find ways of engaging with people so that they are happy to belong to the church; or that the value, success and vitality of the church is to be measured in terms of how people feel about the church; or that if we can only redefine the way we shape the church – its structure, its activities, its language, then we shall be more successful and have a more viable future. Without negating the need to consider each of these assumptions on their own merit, none of them can provide the starting point for the church in addressing the question about its future.

What if we were to explore what we mean by the word 'church' in a different way? What if we were to begin with the gospel itself and take our definitions of the church from the nature of this gospel? In particular, what if we were to consider the relationship between the Gospel and the future, and then see where that leads us in tackling the vexed question of the church and the future?

The Gospel and the future

I want to make the assertion that the gospel of Jesus Christ is essentially a message about the future, about God's promised future for human life and for the world, a future which is now present in Jesus Christ, as a fulfilment of past history and the gift of what is to come¹. It seems to me that each of the four gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) is clear about this claim. I shall indicate what I mean by a cursory overview of each of the four gospels.

Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew is generally considered to be the 'most Jewish' of all four gospels. It is considered to have been written by a Jew in the context of a community of Jewish Christians with Gentiles also in the community. More than any of the other gospel writers, Matthew is concerned to deal with the connection between Jesus and the heritage of God's chosen covenant people Israel. In doing so, the claim that Jesus Christ is the anticipated future fulfilment of the Old Covenant. is a major theme in this gospel. His gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus. Unique to Matthew's gospel, the author deliberately traces the genealogy of Jesus back to Abraham, the father of the Israelites in whom their call to be a covenant people had its beginning (Genesis 12). In other words, the identity of Jesus has its origin in the call of Abraham. The genealogy then continues on through to David, the greatest of the kings of Israel, in order to establish the identity of Jesus in the line of David. Matthew's genealogy is also significant in the listing of forty-two generations. Is it my inclination to look too keenly for significance in numbers or is it a genuine assertion of the author that, using the symbolic importance of the number seven to mean fulfilment or completion, up until the time of Jesus, there have been a multiple of six times seven generations and now Jesus is the beginning of the seventh lot of seven generations, that is, the beginning of a time of fulfilment and perfection. Irrespective of the authenticity of this point, it is clear that already in the genealogy in chapter one of this gospel, the assertion is made that Jesus is the one in whom the promised future of God has arrived.

The author persists with this theme throughout his gospel. Note the account of Jesus' birth (1:18-2:23): The angel, addressing Joseph, declares that their child will be called 'Immanuel' which means *God with us*; he is to be named 'Jesus' because he will liberate people from sin. Unique to Matthew's account of the birth is the appearance of the wise men representing the Gentile religions who bow down to worship Jesus, their

¹ In theology, the term used is 'eschatology'. The claim I am making here is not a new claim. My colleague in Systematic Theology, Christiaan Mostert, has confirmed my own view of its currency in recent theology. The theme of eschatology has found strong expression in our own generation through people like Jurgen Moltmann and Robert Jenson. Christiaan's own recent publication on the theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg (*God and the Future, Continuum Publishing Group 2002*) indicates clearly the centrality of this same theme also for Pannenberg.

journey to Bethlehem causing 'the whole of Jerusalem' to be disturbed. Subsequent to the actual birth of Jesus, again Matthew uniquely records the perilous escape into and subsequent exodus from Egypt, clearly paralleling the ancient foundational Jewish story of Moses, so that Jesus is represented as a new Moses². On several occasions in this early part of his gospel account, the fulfilment of prophecy is mentioned by Matthew (e.g. 1:23; 2:15, 18, 23). A clear and persistent theme is the fact that Jesus is without question the anticipated Messiah whose arrival constitutes the promised future intervention of God and the fulfilment of God's purposes for creation and human history.

Further reinforcement of this claim appears throughout the gospel. Note Jesus' baptism (3:13f) which is 'to fulfil all righteousness'; note the account of Jesus' temptations in the wilderness (4:1ff) in which Jesus faces and resists temptations which parallel those faced and succumbed to by the people of Israel in the wilderness of Mount Sinai, thereby establishing Jesus as uniquely faithful in covenant with God; the temptation story is followed by the first teachings of Jesus in the sermon which he delivers 'on the mount', doubtlessly a parallel for Matthew to Moses ascending Mt Sinai to receive the ten commandments. This whole section of the gospel is persuasively clear about the significance of the person of Jesus as the one in whom God's future has come.³

It is worth observing some of the features of Matthew's record of the crucifixion of Jesus (Matt 27:50ff). According to this gospel, when Jesus is crucified, the curtain of the temple in Jerusalem is torn in two from top to bottom, the whole earth quakes, the dead are raised from the tombs and the centurion recognises that truly this was the Son of God. Each of these elements is informed by the same assertion, that in Jesus of Nazareth, God's promised coming to bring about the decisive and final fulfilment of God's purposes for creation has been achieved.

The gospel of Matthew concludes with the final appearance of Jesus to his disciples on a mountain in Galilee, recorded in 28:11-20.⁴ Matthew records that on seeing the risen Jesus, they worship him, as their first and appropriate response to the Easter event ... and then Jesus declares: *All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me ... therefore go to all nations, etc ... and behold, I am with you always to the end of the age*. The Easter event has established the fact that in Jesus, the cosmic rule of God has been achieved. The gospel appropriately concludes at this point.

In summary, for St Matthew, Jesus embodies and fulfils the hopes of God's covenant with Israel; he is 'God with us' and becomes liberator from captivity for the world. The future of God for the world is embodied and fulfilled in Jesus; in him human history is now destined to become the Kingdom of heaven.

Mark

The gospel of Mark is generally considered to be the first of the four gospels written. It is the shortest and in many ways the most concise of the gospels. It omits any reference to the birth and early life of Jesus, focusing on the public ministry of Jesus, and in particular on the final week of his life, culminating in his death. For Mark, the purpose of his gospel and the significance of Jesus is summed up in the open public declaration made by Jesus in 1:15 *The time is fulfilled ... the Kingdom of God has drawn near; repent and believe the good news*. In this declaration, the nature of Jesus' ministry and the purpose of Mark's gospel are clearly indicated. The gospel writer wants to assert that the motivation for the writing of his gospel is to document the fact that in Jesus of Nazareth, God has acted decisively in coming into the midst of human history to establish the rule of God, on the basis of which the world is invited to turn and live in a new and transformed way. To 'repent' is to take up the invitation to live in the light of the presence of God's kingdom in the person of Jesus.

² My colleague and New Testament scholar, Dorothy Lee, has drawn to my attention the fact that there is currently some dispute about the thesis that Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses. The extent to which this thesis can be supported or disputed is a matter of ongoing debate, but the intention of Matthew is undoubtedly to persuade his own Jewish community of the significance of Jesus as the one who fulfils the hopes of the Jewish people. I have been persuaded that central to his gospel is the use of themes and images strongly associated with the Moses story.

³ In this regard, note also ch. 11:1ff where Jesus is clearly identified by Matthew as the anticipated Coming One. Further to this, we ought note that Jesus is depicted clearly as the one who truly fulfils the Law. This claim is made not only directly in Matthew 5:17f, but also in the fact that Jesus is uniquely the one who, in contrast to the Pharisees, is integrated in both his words and his deeds. In support of this also, Matthew records Jesus' teaching in five blocks of writing, fulfilling and perfecting the teaching of the five books of the Torah.

⁴ Mountains play a very significant role for Matthew; they are the place of special revelation. (Note the reference to mountains in the temptation story, the Sermon on the Mount, the transfiguration, the crucifixion and the final commissioning of the disciples in Galilee.)

The remainder of St Mark's gospel is taken up with a working out of what it means for the kingdom of God to have 'drawn near' in Jesus. Jesus silences evil spirits, heals the demon-possessed, exposes the world's blindness, and takes upon himself the world's suffering. The focus of this gospel on the suffering of Jesus is represented in the fact that half of this gospel (from chapter 8 onwards) is taken up with the account of the journey of Jesus on the path of suffering to his death Jerusalem. This journey climaxes in Jesus' hellish cry of dereliction on the cross '*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*'(15:34) from which the early church's Apostles' Creed declares that Jesus *descended into hell*. In death and resurrection, Jesus embraces the fullness of the suffering of the world and determines that the final word for all human life is life and not death, heaven and not hell. In his own distinctive way then, Mark makes the claim that Jesus' life, death and resurrection constitutes the presence of God's coming Kingdom. Jesus engages with a blinded world captive to evil, plagued by suffering, and brings unexpected victory and unimagined hope. For Mark, this is a message of good news for the world: a new reality has come into our midst in Jesus; its location is a suffering world and its shape is crucifixion; the hell of evil and suffering is embraced in God and overcome; we may now 'hope against hope'⁵.

Luke

Like Matthew, Luke also has a birth story of Jesus. Similar in some ways to Matthew, it is distinctive in many others. Uniquely Luke records the birth story of John the Baptist as a precursor to Jesus' birth, and within this account, makes it clear that John the Baptist will be the forerunner of Jesus who prepares the world to recognise in Jesus the decisive act of God in bringing the kingly rule of God in human history. Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is also unique, including the announcement to Mary of her pregnancy, Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth the mother of John the Baptist, the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, the birth in the stable of the inn, the joyous gathering of the shepherds, and the presentation of Jesus in the temple for circumcision at eight days. In each of these stories, the claim of the significance of Jesus as the one in whom God has come in a unique and decisive way for the world is made.

Like Matthew, Luke also has a genealogy of Jesus, but unlike Matthew, Luke's genealogy goes back to Adam, the first human. Already in this apparently benign documentation, Luke is setting the scene for his distinctive insights about the meaning and purpose of Jesus' life, namely that in Jesus, a new humanity has commenced. The nature of this is indicated in Luke's unique record of the commencement of his public ministry. In the well known account in chapter 4:16-21, Jesus appears in the synagogue in Nazareth; he stands up to read and is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He opens the scroll and reads from Isaiah 61 ... *the Spirit of the Lord is upon me ...*'. The reading then details the way in which the ministry of God's spirit-anointed servant brings about the transformation of broken human life.

The key element of this Lukan narrative is that after reading the scroll, we are told that Jesus sits down and while all eyes are upon him, he makes the extravagant declaration: *Today this reading has been fulfilled in your hearing*(v.21).⁶ This is the point which Luke wants to make, namely that the prophetic promise of a transformed life and world is now present in Jesus.

Just as the gospel of Mark is an extended exegesis of the claim of Jesus in Mark 1:15, so the gospel of Luke is an extended exegesis of this episode where the public ministry is announced. According to Luke, Jesus' ministry is about giving 'new humanity' in the context of broken and dehumanised life. We should note especially the well known stories which are unique to this gospel. The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is told with the essential purpose, not simply to encourage us to be 'good samaritans' in our dealing with other people, but to say that in Jesus Christ, God is the quintessential good samaritan to us and to the world – God comes to us in Jesus Christ, and in life, death and resurrection, has compassion upon our broken lives, attends to us and heals us. In a similar way Luke tells the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), the centre of which I like to think is that point in the story where, in seeing his profligate son at a distance, the father runs to him, and ignoring the son's rehearsed and calculated confession, embraces him and covers him with the extravagant signs of welcome, setting the son in a place which far exceeded his best hope. Again for Luke, the purpose is Christological, namely to tell us that in Jesus Christ, God has run to us and embraced us, overlooking our waywardness and pouring out his extravagant goodness upon us.

Luke's unique reporting of the event of the cross is also worthy of mention here, in particular, the encounter between Jesus and the criminals on the cross (23:39-43). To the criminal who is rightly being crucified for his crimes (*we indeed have been condemned justly for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds*), Jesus declares *Truly this day you will be with me in paradise*. The force of Jesus' declaration is to redefine radically

⁵ 'hope against hope' is actually a quotation from Romans 4:18 but is appropriate to this summary of Mark's gospel.

⁶ It is most common in popular use of this passage from St Luke to claim that the church is endowed with the Spirit and is called to exercise this spirit-anointed ministry; however for St Luke, the point is that Jesus is uniquely the one in whom this prophecy is fulfilled in human history. The church's calling is to celebrate that fact.

the humanity of the criminal, who in the world's terms is justly condemned as one who deserves death. In the face of this, Jesus announces the gift of life in paradise. It is Luke's way of stating, yet again, that the purpose of Jesus, which is fulfilled in the event of the cross, is to transform and redefine all broken and condemned human life. It is a fair summary of the whole of this gospel to say that its purpose is to set out the life of Jesus as a new 'Adam', who displays what it is to be truly human, and gracefully gives new humanity to a broken world. Luke's good news story for the world is that in Jesus, the lost are found, the broken are healed, the condemned are exalted, all humanity is redefined. In other words, God's promised future has come.

John

We come finally to the gospel of John. Perhaps more spectacularly and persuasively than any of the other gospels, Jesus is uniquely and exclusively the one in whom God's life-giving presence is made known and made available. Jesus is the one in whom the life-giving and saving glory of God is uniquely present in and for the world.

From the outset (1:1-18), John traces the significance of Jesus back, not just to Abraham (Matthew – a new covenant)), or to Adam (Luke – a new humanity), but to creation.⁷ *In the beginning was the Word ... the Word became flesh and dwelt among us ... full of grace and truth.* John deliberately picks up the Genesis story of the beginning of creation (Genesis 1:1ff) to set the context of Jesus' birth. Just as in that creation story, God brings creation into being by the use of speech. For John, Jesus, as the Word of God, is God's creative, life-giving word who has come to bring about nothing less than a new creation⁸. Picking up the motifs of the second creation story (Genesis 2:4ff), in which humankind is expelled from the garden of Eden and barred from access to the tree of life, thus condemning humankind to an existence without access to life, Jesus is the one in whom God's gift of abundant life is once again made available. This gift comes by virtue of Jesus' victory over the very powers which have plagued creation, overshadowing human life with the dark clouds of alienation, evil and death. This victory is finally accomplished in Jesus' exaltation on the cross in which he confronts the 'ruler of this age' and thereby draws all humankind into communion with himself (12:27f).

In order to make this point vividly, John records six miracles of Jesus⁹; each one is described as a 'sign', pointing beyond itself to who Jesus is, and ultimately to 'the hour' of his crucifixion. These six miracles, all of which bestow something of God's creative life, culminate in ch.11:1-12:11, the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, and prompting the declaration of Jesus as *the resurrection and the life* (11:25), the one in whom resurrection life (or 'eternal life' as John also describes it), promised by God at the end of time, is now a present reality. At the end of this 'significant story, John then turns his attention to the real focus of each of these first six signs, namely Jesus' own death and resurrection. At the very point of Jesus' death on the cross, in contrast to the accounts of each of the other three gospels, his final words are a cry of victory, *It is accomplished!* (19:30).

In summarising this fourth gospel, we may say that John presents Jesus as God's creative, life-giving Word, who dwells with us as the epiphany of God's glory, with a vocation to renew the whole of creation – now in blindness, darkness, hunger, thirst, alienated and under the power of death. In his death and resurrection God conquers death and brings life, liberating people for all forms of captivity, evil and sin, reconciling all humankind to God and to each other. Jesus is uniquely the life, light, truth, vine, shepherd, bread, water for the world.

In attempting to draw all four gospels together¹⁰, it is possible to assert that the gospel of Jesus Christ is essentially about God's unique and decisive action to break into a broken world with what is God's promised

⁷ Dorothy Lee, colleague and New Testament scholar who is widely regarded for her Johannine scholarship has made it clear to me that for John, Christology begins in the eternity before creation and not simply in the incarnation. Her own views are recorded in her acclaimed book *'Flesh and Glory'* (Crossroad Publishing Co. 2002)

⁸ As a note of interest, it is pertinent that in this gospel, Jesus speaks a lot – in fact Jesus himself is the speech of God.

⁹ Some scholars speak of seven signs rather than six, including the epiphany of Jesus on the water following the story of the feeding of the 5000 (6:16-21) which includes both his walking on the water and the miraculous landing of the boat. By including this as a sign, the story of Lazarus becomes the seventh and symbolically the perfect sign. Where only six signs are recognised, Jesus' own crucifixion and resurrection can be understood to be the fulfilment and perfection (i.e. the 'seventh') of the previous six.

¹⁰ I have dealt only with the four gospels and not with the writings of the apostle Paul. In a similar way, I could have set out the argument that for Paul, the earliest of the authors of New Testament writings, Jesus is the one in whom God has acted uniquely and decisively to transform a broken world and to inaugurate the promised rule of God. In various ways, this is the force of all of Paul's writings, his declarations and his pleading.

future for the world. Jesus Christ embodies, distributes and accomplishes God's promised future for the world. Jesus Christ is the Future Man.¹¹

What are the implications of this claim for the nature and purpose of the church, and in particular for its future? In my view, they are dramatic, and they profoundly reorientate the way in which most thinking about the church and its mission in today's challenging climate is tackled, not least by those regarded to be the most progressive¹².

The Church and the future

The church, as the Body of Christ, the community of the disciples of Jesus, finds its essential definition, its meaning and its purpose in terms of Jesus Christ and his Gospel¹³. If this is so, then the implications of what I have said above for the nature and purpose of the church are profound. If it is true that Jesus is the one who inaugurates God's future for the world, then it is essential for us to say that the church, as the community of Jesus Christ, is the community of people whose unique vocation is to live on the basis of this promised future. 'Church' is then properly defined as the new way of life in the world which lives according to God's promised future, and in so doing, is itself the embodiment and anticipation of this future.¹⁴

In this sense, the church is a sign of the future for the whole world which itself does not know of this future and does not live according to this future. With the logic of this, the following series of summary statements can now be made ...

- The church is uniquely the community of people who are called upon to celebrate, embody and witness to the Future of God for the world, which has come into human history in Jesus Christ. In that sense, 'church' is the vocation to live our lives in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and therefore from God's future.
- The church thus embodies and anticipates the future which God has in store for the world
- To ask the question: *What is the future of the church (in the world)?* makes little sense when the church, by definition, is the embodiment and anticipation of God's future for the world.
- If it were not for the church, the world would not have a future, or to put it more accurately, if it were not for the church, which has the vocation of representing God's future in the world, the world would not know of its future.
- The church is the sign of hope for the world in the sense that the church has the vocation of pointing the world to the new creation which has come in Jesus Christ, and which will be fulfilled for all humankind.
- On the commonly mentioned issue of 'relevance', it is a matter of *the relevance of the church in relation to God's future* rather than the relevance of the church in relation to the world. The church becomes irrelevant to its true vocation when the church loses its way as uniquely the people of the gospel. It does this when it uses the world as its criterion for relevance.

¹¹ If we have not understood this about the nature and purpose of the gospels, then we have an insufficient grasp of the Christian faith. It is what theologians have referred to as 'eschatology'. The theologian who has been one of the most articulate, and for me the most influential writer on this theme, is Jurgen Moltman, and especially his trilogy of books from the 1970s: *Theology of Hope*, *The Crucified God*, and *The Church in the Power of the Holy Spirit*.

¹² Here I include authors of the popular 'future church' books like *The Shaping of Things to Come* (Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch), *Church Next* (Eddie Gibbs and Ian Coffey), *The Once and Future Church* (Loren Mead). In my view, they all fail to recognise the essential nature of the church as eschatological and therefore, paradoxically, operate within the framework of Enlightenment categories.

¹³ I am not making a direct identification here between Jesus and the church, and certainly not implying that the church now continues what was begun in Jesus. Indeed the church lives both out of the gospel and under the judgement of the gospel. The uniqueness of the nature and purpose of the church is that it is the community of people who find their being from the gospel and are called and enabled by the Holy Spirit to embody and witness to the gospel in the world. I recognise that further work needs to be done on this theme of the relationship between Jesus Christ and the church and the unique place of the church in the transmission of the gospel through time.

¹⁴ This is the presupposition about the church which is the basis of all Paul's writings to the congregations of the early church. In almost every letter, he declares their newly defined being in Christ and then takes them to task for living in contradiction to this. Their calling is to be a people of the kingdom of God inaugurated in Jesus Christ, within a world which is unaware of its presence.

- Again, on the matter of 'relevance', it is a matter of *the relevance of the world in relation to the church* rather than vice-versa. Theologically, it is the world which is out of date and old-fashioned, because it lives as though God's future in Christ has not come.
- The particular form which the church takes will vary from time to time and place to place, and while this is a matter for engagement, it is not the primary matter. When people speak of the fact that the church in our era is dying, what is really meant is that a particular form of the church is dying rather than the church per se. Down through the ages, the church takes on forms which evolve from and respond to its particular time and place and context. In my view, the shape of the church in the era of Christendom is currently undergoing radical challenge because this shape of the church can no longer be sustained.¹⁵
- If the church is preoccupied with its form or its survival, and fails to recognise and respond to its unique calling as the representation of God's future for the world, then it has lost its true purpose and in this sense is already dead.

The above series of statements redefines the way in which we understand and respond to our initial question: *What future – our church?* When the question is put in the way in which we started, we are operating in the framework where we assume that the world sets the agenda for the church and determines the effectiveness of the church. In the rapidly changing times in which we live, marked as they are by the apparently decreasing relevance of the church (in the measurement of the world), and the redefining of the place of the church in the culture (especially with the collapse of Christendom), we then become anxious about the impact of the church, wanting to reclaim lost ground and to restore what we think is the proper place of the church in the world, namely at its centre. This is what has given rise to the commonly asked question, *what future – our church?*

However, if we operate in the framework of a theologically defined gospel and church, and accept that the church is essentially the community called upon to represent the new world of God's future as this has come in Jesus Christ, irrespective of the size and shape of the church, then the question, *What future?* is understood differently. With this different approach, the question about the future is a question which belongs to all humankind (the world itself). It is a question which has been answered already by God in Jesus Christ, and the church is called upon, in its life, to re-present this answer in and for the world. In this way, the question: *What future?* Has as its answer: the church!

In other words, the question with which we began, *What future – our church?* has become *What future – the church!* The question mark (?) has become an exclamation mark (!).

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¹⁵ In my view there is still some considerable 'dying' of the present form of the church yet to take place. It is not a simple matter to anticipate a future shape of the church but the indications are that the church's place in Australian society will be as one faith group in a society of several faiths and religions; the church will be marginal to the main interests and activities of our society; there will be a diversity of forms and styles of church life; congregations may be increasingly dependent on lay leadership; there may be little interest among church people in denominational loyalty; there will be fewer resources to maintain the structures and activities and buildings which we have known in the past; for some church communities, there may be only a loose connection with buildings.