Hope for Humanity

A Theology of Liberation and the Beautiful City

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I am going to look at the three linked New Testament visions of hope for humanity which, perhaps surprisingly to some, are not about going to heaven when you die but all three about a happy life on Earth in a fair and kind society. These three visions are: Jesus proclaiming the imminent Reign of God or kindness coming on Earth, Paul's vision of a new humanity as one body – the body of Christ – and the vision in Revelation of the Beautiful City coming down to Earth. Of course, in the New Testament these stories all have a supernatural component – they come about by divine activity. If we can no longer believe in supernatural beings to come and save us, what value can these visions still have?

I think their value is as *poetic* visions. You could call the poetic a kind of shining, or if you like, illumination. And one of the things the human poetic genius or imagination does is create this whole supernatural realm. As Blake puts it:

> As all men are alike (though infinitely various), so all Religions, have one source. The true Man is the source, he being the Poetic Genius.

God can be a personification of cosmic, earthly and human forces, including moral forces. And as Don Cupitt has said, one reason why the human poetic genius creates God is as a leading idea. You know, when they say the word 'idea' in Bristol they pronounce it 'ideal' and that fits rather well here; God can be a leading idea or ideal, if you like a 'guiding light'. The proto-Indo European word for God Dyeus comes from the root *div/diu* (as in our word 'divine') that means 'shining', and throughout the Bible we find the idea of the divine as a shining, or even blazing. God directs Moses from the burning bush, God leads the children of Israel out of slavery as a pillar of fire by night. John's gospel says of the divine Word: 'In him was light and the light was the light of humanity'.

So if we read our three New Testament offerings of hope for humanity – the Reign of God, the body of Christ and the beautiful city – *as* poetic visions, with their supernatural element created by the human poetic genius, that means we cannot expect any supernatural aid, we have to do it ourselves. In view of our history that sounds like a tall order, we might think it called for hope against hope. But what is the alternative? Those poetic visions of hope have shone for many people and inspired them to be kind and to act. I think they can still inspire us and offer hope for humanity.

The Reign of God

I'll start with the Reign of God. In Luke Mary is the first to proclaim the gospel. In her *Magnificat* she says: 'My soul magnifies the Lord' because:

> He has scattered the proud
> in the imagination of their hearts.
> He has put down the mighty from their thrones
> and lifted up the lowly;
> he has filled the hungry with good things
> and sent the rich empty away. (Lk 1: 51-53)

The child she is carrying will inaugurate a new order, turning the world upside down. We note that in her song the verbs are in the past, the perfect tense: 'he has scattered, he has put down, he has filled' and so on. But these things *haven't* happened yet and 'he' in the poem, that is, God, *hasn't* done it. It is a poetic vision whose realisation remains up to us.

One of the things I love about this song is that the hungry are not just fobbed off with some thin gruel in a soup kitchen or tinned spaghetti hoops from a food bank, but filled with *good* things. Likewise in John's gospel, at the wedding feast of Cana when the wine runs out, Mary gives her son Jesus a nudge and he turns water into wine, not just any old wine, but the best wine.

In Luke, the grown up Jesus begins his ministry by going into the synagogue of Nazareth, his home town, and quoting the prophet Isaiah:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
> because he has anointed me to preach good news
> to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
> and recovery of sight to the blind,
> to set at liberty those who are oppressed...

Then he says: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your ears.' Of course, his fellow townspeople are horrified at the pretensions of this carpenter's son and take him to the top of a hill to throw him over the cliff. (He escapes.)

Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount is the Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6: 20f), where Jesus says:

> Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
> Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied.
> Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh.

Jesus preached that this Kingdom or Reign of Kindness would come upon Earth 'in the lifetime of some of those standing here present,' listening to him. It didn't come and it still has not come, (except partly, here and there). Jesus was mistaken and I think he was also mistaken that there is a supernatural being who will bring it about. But Jesus' gospel, 'good news' for the poor and distressed, his poetic vision of an inclusive and kind society on Earth remains a leading idea, a guiding light. Indeed, it has inspired many initiatives, for example, the creation of the National Health Service in 1948. Among other things, the NHS has often brought 'recovery of sight to the blind' through cataract operations.

The Christ Epic and the Body of Christ

Now I turn to the second New Testament vision of hope I want to talk about – the Christ Epic and the Body of Christ. Quite often we hear people say yes, Jesus was a sage and a great ethical teacher, so let's try and follow him and ditch all that stuff about Christ added on by Paul and others. But when we consider Paul's idea of a new humanity being, as he puts it, 'in Christ' as one body, we find it has a good deal in common with Jesus' own vision of the reign of God.

First, I want to say that I don't think Jesus was perfect. People who want to keep Jesus and ditch the Christ Epic quite often seem to adopt a kind of black and white approach, Jesus good, Christ Epic piffle, or as Philip Pullman put it: 'the good man Jesus and the scoundrel Christ'. Jesus was a kind and brave man, not afraid to disregard silly regulations, a brilliant storyteller and teacher, with a good sense of humour and a shining vision of a reign of kindness coming on Earth. However, just to give a couple of examples, we are shown him as a brattish teenager in the story of him getting lost in the Temple, and until he is actually hanging on the cross, in every reported encounter with his mother he is offhand or rude to her. He is bad-tempered when he's hungry because he's had no breakfast and curses the fig tree for having no figs, even in the wrong season for fruit. Nevertheless, his vision of kindness and his commitment to it to the death remain and shine.

Paul was certainly a mixed character, as most of us are, but his idea of the Christ is also an inspiring vision of hope. First, let's look again the *kenosis* poem in his Letter to the Philippians. Most scholars agree that Paul himself wrote this letter but disagree about whether he wrote the poem or is quoting what may have been an earlier Christian hymn. If Paul is quoting, then the poem may have been written years before the letter itself (probably written from prison in Ephesus around 54-6 AD). The poem is introduced by the words: 'Be of this mind which was also in Christ Jesus, who:

Though he was in the form of God,
he did not regard being equal with God
as something to cling on to,

but emptied himself
taking the form of a servant;
born as a human being and found in human shape,

he lowered himself,
becoming obedient till death –
death on a cross.

*

Therefore God raised him high
and gave him the name
that is above every name,

so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend
in heaven, on earth and in the underworld,

and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord
to the glory of God the Father.

The poem is in two parts, each with three verses. The first part is a descent down to the depths of humiliation and death, and the second part an ascent up again to the heights on the other side. So it is a kind of V shape: down then up. But after the turning point, it is not a case of being back where he started. In each part there is a transformation: in the first part the divine hero descends, becomes human and dies, in the second part this man ascends and becomes Lord.

Christ begins 'in the form of God' but *empties* himself, *lowers* himself and dies in disgrace as a criminal. He is associated with the very depths, the scum of the Earth. Then, carrying all this with him, he is raised high and given 'the name that is above every name' – the supreme divine name LORD, which is a way of referring to God's own name YHWH. Christ becomes the prototype, head or figurehead, of a new humanity that is above all the visible and invisible thrones, dominations, principalities and powers which shape our society. These powers that 'post o'er land and ocean without rest' and rule our lives now, such as Money and the Market (maybe data harvesters), are seen as becoming *subject* to humanity, serving people's needs rather than exploiting them.

Money or Mammon is the only idol mentioned by name in the Sermon on the Mount. An idol is a false god that demands and feeds on death. We saw the huge human sacrifice it demanded when 71 people died a dreadful death by fire in Grenfell Tower because Money ruled in the choice of cheap and unsafe cladding. And we saw an example of the opposite in the recent rescue of the boys of the Wild Boar football team where people counted above cost. Divers from many countries, including Britain, gave their all and one Thai Navy seal gave his life to rescue all twelve boys and their coach.

One of the few times Paul quotes Jesus' own words is at the Last Supper, when Jesus offers bread saying: 'This is my body.' Paul pursues this idea: 'The bread which we break isn't it a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body because we all share the same bread' (1 Cor 10:.17). The body of Christ becomes a body of people. Divine embodiment is offered to the whole human species as one body of people 'in Christ'. Then, as Paul writes to the Galatians, 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal 3: 28). All are of equal moral worth. Everyone *counts.*

In his book *Inventing the Individual* Larry Siedentop points out what a revolutionary idea this was. He comments on the above quote from Galatians: 'Paul's "one" signals a new transparency in human relations. Through his conception of the Christ, Paul insists on the moral equality of humans, on a status equally shared by all.' Paul's conception 'overturns the assumption on which ancient thinking had hitherto rested, the assumption of natural inequality.' So we have a society where people matter more than money or the Market and what counts is humanity.

In liberation theology Christ is to be found today in *people now living* and first and foremost in 'the crucified people', who suffer severe hardships and oppression and aspire to a better life – 'resurrection'. This idea of the Christ resonates strongly with Jesus' vision of the Reign of God, in which what matters is humanity and the poor come first. The Christ Epic and the Reign of God are two poetic visions – or ambitions– of the same hope for humanity. Both are visions of human kindness, the fulfilment of the potential of humankind.

The touchstone of a kind society is that it is good news for the poor. Today the forces of the anti-Kingdom are strong. The policy of 'austerity' which was imposed after the 2008 bank crash, particularly since 2010, was very bad news for the poor. We saw in the recent Ken Loach film *I Daniel Blake* how it has actually killed people, as well as inflicting severe suffering on many. There has been a big increase in rough sleepers and street beggars. At the same time, since 2008 the rich have become richer. According to a report in the *Independent* (10.03.2015), the rich are 64% richer since before the recession, while the poor are 57% poorer. We heard the recent squeals of outrage when it was suggested that the richest people pay a bit more income tax to help fund the NHS.

The Beautiful City

A kingdom and a body of people are both social/political entities, as well as consisting of individuals. Now we come to my third and last poetic vision at the end of the final New Testament book, Revelation (probably written during the reign of the Emperor Domitian 81-96 AD). This time it is an actual *polis* or city, the New Jerusalem:

> I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, *coming down* out of heaven from God, dressed as a bride for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying:
>
> See the home of God is among humans,
> and he will dwell with them
> and they will be his peoples,
> and God himself will be with them;
> he will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

The wedding is on Earth, the bride is the New Jerusalem and her bridegroom is Christ the Lamb. The city is enormous 24,000 square kilometres (12,000 *stadia*). The number 12 and its multiples symbolise wholeness in Revelation. God himself comes down to Earth to make his home among humans, men and women. There is no temple in the city. God does not need to be approached elsewhere, via a Holy of Holies, his home is on Earth in the beautiful city, all humanity. God is with us – Emmanuel. The whole city, all humanity, shines. 'The glory of God is its light'. As Irenaeus was to express it in the second century: *gloria Dei vivens homo:* the glory of God is the human being alive.

Now I'd like to say something about two poets who were both inspired by this vision of the beautiful city in Revelation. First, William Blake's *Jerusalem.* Many English poets and intellectuals were inspired by the *liberté, égalité et fraternité* of the French Revolution of 1789. As the poet Wordsworth wrote:

> Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive
> but to be young was very heaven…

Blake knew Tom Paine, who wrote *The Rights of Man* (1791-2) and was involved in both the American and French Revolutions. Blake also knew Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote *The Rights of Woman* (1792) and had spent time in revolutionary France. Perhaps Blake's profoundest poetic response to it was his long poem *Jerusalem,* written some years later between 1804 and 1820. Parts of Blake's *Jerusalem* are as obscure as parts of the book of Revelation itself. But in a lyrical poem within the poem, distinguished from the rest by being written in four-beat rhyming quatrains., Blake picks up on *Revelation's* climactic image of Jerusalem, the beautiful city coming down to Earth. And for Blake she is a transformed London. He lists the familiar names of London districts to stress that the reign of kindness, the new Jerusalem, can only be realised here on Earth or nowhere: 'Making all things new' does not mean a *replacement* of the old but a renewal, a transformation, of it. Blake was firmly rooted in the English dissenting tradition and is buried in the dis-

senters' cemetery Bunhill Fields. But here Blake's theology is very Thomist, for as Thomas Aquinas put it: 'Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it.'

> The fields from Islington to Marybone,
> To Primrose Hill and Saint John's Wood,
> Were builded over with pillars of gold
> And there Jerusalem's pillars stood.
>
> Pancras and Kentish Town repose
> Among her golden pillars high,
> Among her golden arches which
> Shine upon the starry sky.

'*There* Jerusalem's pillars stood.' The beautiful city is here where we are, not up in the sky. But note that the first verse is in the past tense. This is still like a dream of an imaginary ideal past. But with 'Pancras and Kentish Town *repose*' the tense changes to the present. The dream is becoming less remote. But then *'Jerusalem fell'.* Humanity falls far short of the beautiful dream.

> Jerusalem fell from Lambeth's Vale
> Down through Poplar and Old Bow,
> Through Malden and across the Sea
> in War and howling, death and woe.

The poem was written during the Napoleonic wars but the next verse, with the Rhine, the Danube and the Euphrates 'red with human blood,' could also be prophetic of the wars of the last century from 1914 to date:

> The Rhine was red with human blood,
> The Danube rolled a purple tide,
> On the Euphrates Satan stood
> And over Asia stretched his pride.

Nevertheless, despite all the awful things we humans do to one another, at the heart of the poem:

> The Divine Vision still was seen,
> Still was the Human Form Divine,
> Weeping in weak and mortal clay,
> O Jesus, still the Form was thine.

But there is a conflict. This Human Form Divine is also the Lamb of God, 'whom I/Slew in my dark self-righteous pride'. The Lamb represents all the innocent victims of human cruelty. Both the perpetrators and the victims of cruelty are human and this human capacity for unkindness is at war in us with our potential as the Human Form Divine. 'Satan', the 'warlike fiend' is part of what we are, as well as Jesus, the Human Form Divine: The Divine and the Satanic are both located within humanity; we can create heaven or hell on Earth:

> Spectre of Albion! warlike fiend!
> In clouds of blood and ruin rolled,
> I here reclaim thee as my own,
> My selfhood! Satan! armed in gold.

This cruelty may even call itself 'soft family love':

> Is this thy soft family love,
> Thy cruel patriarchal pride,
> Planting thy family alone,
> Destroying all the world beside?

Nevertheless, through thick and thin, the vision of the beautiful city, the kind and inclusive society, remains. Blake's lyric concludes:

> In my exchanges every land
> Shall walk, and mine in every land
> Mutual shall build Jerusalem
> Both heart in heart and hand in hand.

It is universal: 'every land shall walk'. At the beginning of the poem, as well as being in the past tense, the verb was in the passive: Jerusalem was 'builded'. Now the verb is active and in the future: we '*shall* build'. The beautiful city does not come by supernatural intervention but by human action and transformation, *we* have to build Jerusalem. And build it together: *'mutual* shall build'. First of all it requires poetic vision; 'the Divine Vision' is a necessary but not sufficient condition. It also requires both kindness – we must build it 'heart in heart' – and action: we must build it 'hand in hand'. The poem is a call to keep faith – and hope – in humanity.

Blake was a Londoner and as well as seeing his city as the visionary New Jerusalem, he was well aware of its 'chartered streets' and 'marks of weakness and of woe'. London today is also both a 'city of dreadful night' and the beautiful city. I am a Londoner and I love London. If I've been indoors, perhaps struggling to write something like this talk, I love to walk out through the little park and up the street among all the different people speaking our city's 300 languages; I get a shining sense of London with her Londoners living their lives, *being* London. Actually, quite a few people I've talked to say they feel the same. So I can quite understand how it shone for Blake like the shining city in Revelation.

I enjoy being on a London bus, seeing and hearing what is going on, engaging in little conversations. Anyone can get on the bus (if you are neither young nor old enough, you do have to pay). On a bus once I saw an old lady sitting with her Jack Russell on her lap and I asked: 'What's your dog's name?' She replied; 'Archie'. A very English-looking dog with an English-sounding name. Then she added 'Archimedes!' And I suddenly imagined seeing her standing with her dog in Syracuse, as the old Greek philosopher streaked down the street. She was Greek and also a Londoner. Another time I was standing with my two grandsons at the bus stop near the Regent's Park Mosque and a lot of people were coming out of it. When the bus came, we got on, followed by two Muslim women. A younger one boarded first and sat down. Then an older one got on and I nudged my grandson Dan to give up his seat for her. I asked the young woman: 'Have you just been to Friday prayers?' 'Yes,' she said, and added: 'we pray every day but Friday prayers are special.' She opened her bag and took out two apples. She offered one to Dan, who accepted with alacrity. Then she bit hungrily into her own apple and smiled at me. This sort of thing happens, all the time in London – small encounters.

Just one more little incident. One day I was on the bus and a tourist who didn't know you can't pay cash for a ticket wanted to get on. The driver was about to send her away to buy an Oyster card when a passenger near the front of the bus passed an Oyster card to her saying, 'Use mine!' The tourist *did* and wanted to pay the money back. The passenger replied: You don't need to pay me. Enjoy London!'

This year is the fiftieth anniversary of the murder of Martin Luther King on 4th April 1968. It is horrifying to remember that buses were segregated in the USA until the Civil Rights Act of 1964. A London bus is emblematic of an inclusive city. The terrorist attack in 2005 on the number 30 bus in Tavistock Square (where, incidentally, there is a statue of Gandhi) not only killed innocent passengers, but was an attack on the very idea of the beautiful, inclusive city. (In four separate attacks that day 52 people of more than 18 nationalities were killed, and more than700 injured.) The London response in 2005 and again last year the response after the attacks in both London and Manchester were strongly inspired by that vision of the kind and beautiful city. For example, on 22nd May this year, on the anniversary of the Manchester Arena bombing, we saw the huge numbers and tremendous spirit of the singalong *Manchester Together With One Voice* in the ceremony to remember the victims.

The vision in Revelation also inspired Nicaraguan poet and Catholic priest Ernesto Cardenal's *Oracle upon Managua,* written in 1972, shortly after the earthquake which devastated that capital city, when the dictator Somoza embezzled most of the international aid. That idea of the kind city led many Christians to join in the Revolution that toppled Somoza in 1979, after which Cardenal became Minister of Culture in the new Sandinista government. In his *Oracle* he wrote:

> After all God is also City…
> the free city
> where God is everybody
> He, God-with-everybody (Emmanuel)
> the universal City
> the City where God's humanity is revealed to us…

And later in the poem:

> And Yahweh said: I am not.
> I will be. I am the one who will be, he said.
> I am Yahweh a God who waits in the future
> (who cannot be unless the conditions are right)
> God who is not but who WILL BE
> for he is love-among-humans
> and he is not, he WILL BE.

When Yahweh reveals his name to Moses in the burning bush, it is a form of the Hebrew verb 'to be' that could mean I AM and also I WILL BE. Still, it is startling and compelling to hear this poet-priest declare: 'And Yahweh said: I am not.' …but: 'I WILL BE'. Here not only is the reign of God the beautiful city on Earth, but God *is* the City. God has emptied himself into humanity, he is Emmanuel, God-with-us, – humanity *realising* its potential.

Mary Wollstonecraft wrote to her lover Gilbert Imlay, who was with her in revolutionary France: 'Imagination is the true fire stolen from heaven that renders men social by expanding their hearts.' As well as being the fiftieth anniversary of the murder of Martin Luther King, this year is also the fiftieth anniversary of the events – *les évènements* – in Paris in May 1968, when workers and students joined together in huge demonstrations calling for a fairer society. Echoing Wollstonecraft (perhaps unconsciously), one of the graffiti on the walls of Paris read: *'L'imagination au Pouvoir!:* Power to Imagination!' In order to keep hope in dark times, first we need to fire our imagination with ideas of something better. Poetic visions shine and keep warm our hearts. Despite all the slaughter in Blake's lyric 'Jerusalem', he still insists:

> The Divine Vision still was seen,
> Still was the Human Form Divine,
> Weeping in weak and mortal clay…

It is urgent to keep these visions of hope and then, of course, try to realise them, by *being* kind and keeping on struggling to achieve a just and kind society, the beautiful city where tears are wiped away.

This is a shortened version of a talk at the SOF Annual Conference 2018.