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## PREFACE

What are we waiting for? And what are we going to do about it in the meantime?

Those two questions shape this book. First, it is about the ultimate future hope held out in the Christian gospel: the hope, that is, for salvation, resurrection, eternal life, and the cluster of other things that go with them. Second, it is about the discovery of hope within the present world: about the practical ways in which hope can come alive for communities and individuals who for whatever reason may lack it. And it is about the ways in which embracing the first can and should generate and sustain the second.

Most people, in my experience—including many Christians—don't know what the ultimate Christian hope really is. Most people—again, sadly, including many Christians—don't expect Christians to have much to say about hope within the present world. Most people don't imagine that these two could have anything to do with each other. Hence the title of the book: hope comes as a surprise, at several levels at once.

At the first level, the book is obviously about death and about what can be said from a Christian perspective about what lies beyond it. I am not going to attempt a physical or medical analysis of death and its aftermath or a psychological or anthropological description of beliefs and practices having to do with death. There are plenty of books about such things. Rather, I approach the question

as a biblical theologian, drawing on other disciplines but hoping to supply what they usually lack and what I believe the church needs to recapture: the classic Christian answer to the question of death and beyond, which these days is not so much disbelieved (in world and church alike) as simply not known. A survey of beliefs about life after death conducted in Britain in 1995 indicated that though most people believed in some kind of continuing life, only a tiny minority, even among churchgoers, believed in the classic Christian position, that of a future bodily resurrection. Indeed, I often find that though Christians still use the word *resurrection*, they treat it as a synonym for “life after death” or “going to heaven” and that, when pressed, they often share the confusion of the wider world on the subject. And some Christian writers on the subject of death manage to marginalize resurrection and all that goes with it without apparently supposing that any great harm is thereby done.

I should say, as a kind of disclaimer, that at one level I am not well qualified to speak on the subject of death. Now in my late fifties, I am the least bereaved middle-aged person I know. My life has been remarkably free from tragedy; almost all my relatives have lived to a good age. I am surprised and grateful for this, and I certainly don't take it for granted. Moreover, though I have been ordained for over thirty years, the fact that my vocation has led me into universities, on the one hand, and into cathedral and diocesan work, on the other, means that I have conducted fewer funerals and memorial services than most clergy manage in their first two or three years. Seldom have I stood at a deathbed. But, whereas I obviously have a lot to learn firsthand about all these matters, I think I have made up for it by soaking myself, in a way that many don't have the chance to do, in the life and thought of the early Christians.<sup>1</sup> As I do that I regularly return with a sense that their voice has not been disbelieved but simply not heard at all. My aim in this book is to bring their beliefs to light, and I hope to life, again in the conviction that they offer not only the best hope but also the best-grounded hope that we have and, what's more, a hope that joins up, as I have said,

with the hope that ought to energize our work for God's kingdom in the present world.

At the second level, then, the book is about the groundwork of practical and even political theology—of, that is, Christian reflection on the nature of the task we face as we seek to bring God's kingdom to bear on the real and painful world in which we live. (I apologize to librarians that this may cause confusion: is the book to be cataloged with “eschatology”—death, judgment, heaven, and hell—or “politics”?) Here too a disclaimer is in order. I am not a politician, though it is true that by virtue of my office I am a member of the British House of Lords. I have neither run for public office nor campaigned actively—in terms of the sheer hard work of speaking, writing, marching, cajoling—for many of the causes in which I believe. I have tried to put my shoulder to the wheel by other means. But the subjects in which I have specialized, and the pastoral situations I now face every day in a diocese several parts of which suffer severely from the faceless cruelties of the last fifty years, have forced me to think through some of what a Christian should be saying and thinking about rediscovering hope in the public and political world. As I have done so, I have found these two themes of hope, again and again, joining themselves together. I freely hand to potential critics these two disclaimers, my inexperience in both grief and politics and my hope that nevertheless the surprise of the Christian hope in both areas will reenergize and refresh those who work, more than I have been able to do, with both the dying and the dispossessed.

One more general word of introduction. All language about the future, as any economist or politician will tell you, is simply a set of signposts pointing into a fog. We see through a glass darkly, says St. Paul as he peers toward what lies ahead. All our language about future states of the world and of ourselves consists of complex pictures that may or may not correspond very well to the ultimate reality. But that doesn't mean it's anybody's guess or that every opinion is as good as every other one. And—supposing someone came forward

out of the fog to meet us? That, of course, is the central though often ignored Christian belief.

This book grew out of lectures that were originally given in Westminster Abbey during the course of 2001. Some of these were reworked as the Stephenson Lectures in Sheffield, England, in spring 2003; some were given in Holy Trinity Church, Guildford, also in spring 2003; some were reworked again into the Didsbury Lectures at the Nazarene College in Manchester in October 2005; others found their way into church study days in St. Andrew's Church, Charleston, South Carolina, in January 2005; in St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Jacksonville, Florida, in March 2005; in City Church, Newcastle, England, also in 2005; in St. Mark's Theological Centre, Canberra, Australia, in April 2006; in a consortium of churches in Roanoke, Virginia, in March 2007, and (in the form of the Faraday Lecture) in Cambridge in May 2007. I am extremely grateful to all those who invited, welcomed, and hosted me on all these occasions and particularly to those who by their questions and acute comments helped me think through the issues further and avoid at least some mistakes. I am grateful to the Ship of Fools Web site for commissioning the piece included at the end and for permission to republish a lightly emended version of it here. My thanks too to Dr. Nick Perrin, who during his time at Westminster Abbey worked over the text as it then was and made all kinds of helpful suggestions. And my thanks, as ever and always, to Simon Kingston, Joanna Moriarty, and the energetic and watchful staff at SPCK, and their counterparts, not least Mickey Maudlin, at HarperOne.

N. T. Wright

Auckland Castle

Feast of the Ascension 2007

## PART I

# SETTING THE SCENE

## I. ALL DRESSED UP AND NO PLACE TO GO?

### INTRODUCTION

Five snapshots set the scene for the two questions this book addresses.

In autumn 1997 much of the world was plunged into a week of national mourning for Princess Diana, reaching its climax in the extraordinary funeral service in Westminster Abbey. People brought flowers, teddy bears, and other objects to churches, cathedrals, and town halls and stood in line for hours to write touching if sometimes tacky messages in books of condolence. Similar if somewhat smaller occasions of public grief took place following such incidents as the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. They showed a rich confusion of belief, half belief, sentiment, and superstition about the fate of the dead. The reaction of the churches showed how far we had come from what might once have been traditional Christian teaching on the subject.

The second scene was farce, with a serious undertone. Early in 1999 I awoke one morning to hear on the radio that a public figure had been sacked for heretical statements about the afterlife. I listened eagerly. Was this perhaps a radical bishop or theologian, exposed at last? Back came the answer, incredible but true: no, it was a soccer coach. Glen Hoddle, the manager of the England team, declared his belief in a particular version of reincarnation, according

to which sins committed in one life are punished by disabilities in the next. Groups representing disabled people objected strongly, and Hoddle was dismissed. It was commented at the time, however, that reincarnation had become remarkably popular in our society and that it would be very odd if Hindus (many of whom hold similar beliefs) were automatically banned from coaching a national sports team.

The third scene is not a single moment, but the snapshot will be familiar. Twenty or thirty people arrive in slow-moving cars at a shabby building on the edge of town. A tinny electronic organ plays supermarket music. A few words, the press of a button, a solemn look from the undertaker, and they file out again, go home for a cup of tea, and wonder what it was all about. Cremation, almost unknown in the Western world a hundred years ago, is now the preference, actual or assumed, of the great majority. It both reflects and causes subtle but far-reaching shifts in attitudes to death and to whatever hope lies beyond.

I initially wrote those opening descriptions in early 2001. By the end of that year, of course, we had witnessed a fourth moment, too well known but also too horrible to describe or discuss in much detail. The events of September 11 of that year are etched in global memory; the thousands who died and the tens of thousands who were bereaved evoke our love and prayers. I shall not say much more about that day, but for many people it raised once more, very sharply, the questions this book seeks to discuss—as did, in their different ways, the three massive so-called natural disasters of 2004 and 2005: the Asian tsunami of Boxing Day 2004; the hurricanes on the Gulf Coast of North America of August 2005, bringing long-lasting devastation to New Orleans in particular; and the horrifying earthquake in Pakistan and Kashmir in October of that same year.

The fifth scene is a graveyard of a different sort. If you go to the historic village of Easington in County Durham, England, and walk down the hill toward the sea, you come to the town called Easington Colliery. The town still bears that name, but there is no col-

liery there anymore. Where the pit head once stood, with thousands of people working to produce more coal faster and more efficiently than at most other pits, there is smooth and level grass. Empty to the eye, but pregnant with bereavement. All around, despite the heroic efforts of local leaders, there are the signs of postindustrial blight, with all the human fallout of other people's power games. And that sight stands in my mind as a symbol, or rather a symbolic question, every bit as relevant to similar communities in America and elsewhere in the world as they are to my home territory. What hope is there for communities that have lost their way, their way of life, their coherence, their *hope*?<sup>1</sup>

This book addresses two questions that have often been dealt with entirely separately but that, I passionately believe, belong tightly together. First, what is the ultimate Christian hope? Second, what hope is there for change, rescue, transformation, new possibilities within the world in the present? And the main answer can be put like this. As long as we see Christian hope in terms of “going to heaven,” of a salvation that is essentially *away from* this world, the two questions are bound to appear as unrelated. Indeed, some insist angrily that to ask the second one at all is to ignore the first one, which is the really important one. This in turn makes some others get angry when people talk of resurrection, as if this might draw attention away from the really important and pressing matters of contemporary social concern. But if the Christian hope is for *God's new creation*, for “new heavens and new earth,” and if that hope has already come to life in Jesus of Nazareth, then there is every reason to join the two questions together. And if that is so, we find that answering the one is also answering the other. I find that to many—not least, many Christians—all this comes as a surprise: both that the Christian hope is surprisingly different from what they had assumed and that this same hope offers a coherent and energizing basis for work in today's world.

In this first chapter I want to set the scene and open up the questions by looking at the contemporary confusion in our world—the

wider world, beyond the churches—about life after death. Then, in the second chapter, I shall look at the churches themselves, where there seems to me a worryingly similar uncertainty. This will highlight the key questions that have to be asked and suggest a framework for how we go about answering them.

I am convinced that most people, including most practicing Christians, are muddled and misguided on this topic and that this muddle produces quite serious mistakes in our thinking, our praying, our liturgies, our practice, and perhaps particularly our mission to the world. What's more, as the examples at the start of this chapter indicate, the non-Christian world, not least within the contemporary West, is confused about what to believe on its own account, and it is confused too about what Christians are supposed to believe. Often people assume that Christians are simply committed to a belief in "life after death" in the most general terms and have no idea how the more specific notions of resurrection, judgment, the second coming of Jesus, and so on fit together and make any sense—let alone how they relate to the urgent concerns of today's real world.

Nor is this a matter simply of sorting out what to believe about someone who has died or about one's own probable postmortem destiny, important though both of those are. It's a matter of thinking straight about God and his purposes for the cosmos and about what God is doing right now, already, as part of those purposes. From Plato to Hegel and beyond, some of the greatest philosophers declared that what you think about death, and life beyond it, is the key to thinking seriously about everything else—and, indeed, that it provides one of the main reasons for thinking seriously about anything at all. This is something a Christian theologian should heartily endorse.

So, without further delay, we plunge into the confusion on this topic that exists in the wider world, the world outside the church door.

## CONFUSION ABOUT HOPE: THE WIDER WORLD

Beliefs about death and what lies beyond come in all shapes and sorts and sizes. Even a quick glance at the classic views of the major religious traditions gives the lie to the old idea that all religions are basically the same. There is a world of difference between the Muslim who believes that a Palestinian boy killed by Israeli soldiers goes straight to heaven and the Hindu for whom the rigorous outworking of karma means that one must return in a different body to pursue the next stage of one's destiny. There is a world of difference between the Orthodox Jew who believes that all the righteous will be raised to new individual bodily life in the resurrection and the Buddhist who hopes after death to disappear like a drop in the ocean, losing one's own identity in the great nameless and formless Beyond.<sup>2</sup> And there are of course major variations between different branches or schools of thought in these great religions.

So too there are wide varieties of beliefs about what the dead are up to right now. In many parts of Africa the ancestors still play a large role in communal and family life, and there are widespread and complex systems for seeking their help or at least preventing them from making mischief. Nor are these beliefs—as Western secularists might arrogantly assume—confined to so-called primitive peoples. The anthropologist Nigel Barley tells how he met a highly trained Japanese colleague who had worked near him in Chad. Barley had been fascinated by "the complicated form of ancestor-worship involving bones and the destruction of the skull and all sorts of exchanges between the dead and the living." His Japanese friend had found all this quite dull. Barley comments:

He was, of course, a Buddhist who had a shrine to his departed parents in his living room, on which regular offerings were made. . . . He had taken to Africa some bone from his dead father's leg, carefully wrapped in white cloth, to ensure protection during his fieldwork.

For me [Barley comments], ancestor worship was something to be described and analysed. For him, it would be the *absence* of such links between the living and the dead that would require special explanation.<sup>3</sup>

Coming closer to home, we have seen in our own day and culture a bewildering variety not only of stated beliefs but also of tell-tale practices associated with death and life afterward. I suspect there was never a period when Christian orthodoxy on the subject was the belief of even the majority of people in Britain. Certainly, already by the time of the Victorians there was a wide variety of belief as people wrestled with questions of faith and doubt. This variety of belief toward the end of the nineteenth century was closely reflected, as we shall see, in the hymns and prayers of the church.

Moving forward toward our own time, the First World War produced not only a great deal of sudden death but also much reflection on its meaning. Some historians have suggested that belief in hell, already under attack from theologians in the nineteenth century, was one of the major casualties of the Great War. There had been so much hell on earth that people couldn't believe that God would create such a place hereafter as well. So much death affected so many at that time, and again less than a generation later in World War II, that my own reading of our twentieth-century British attitudes to death is that there was simply too much to cope with. I grew up in a culture of near silence about death; children in the 1950s were insulated from it. I didn't attend a funeral until I was nearly twenty. This may have been, I suspect, a reaction against perceived melodramatic Victorian deathbed and funeral practices. It may also have been a strategy whereby adults might protect themselves from their own enormous and still-buried grief, which could all too clearly be reflected in and brought to the surface by the innocent reactions of a child.

But if death, and life beyond, was the great unmentionable in the 1950s, it certainly is not today. Films, plays, and novels explore

it from all kinds of angles. Films like *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and *Perchance to Dream* reflect the interest, even the fascination, of a new generation with the question they had not asked and to which they knew no satisfying answers. The darker end of the market walks in death, not only in screened violence but also in snuff movies, where death becomes the ultimate thrill. The nihilism to which secularism has given birth leaves many with no reason for living, and death is once again in the cultural air.

The most brilliant play I saw when we lived in London was the Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Wit* by Margaret Edson, a schoolteacher from Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>4</sup> The heroine, Vivian Bearing, is a renowned specialist in the *Holy Sonnets* of John Donne, and the entire play takes place in the cancer ward, where she is herself dying, reflecting as she does so on Donne's great sonnet "Death Be Not Proud," to which I shall presently return. The play was more successful in New York than in London; perhaps Britain is not yet as ready for a full exploration of midlife death as are our American cousins. But the questions are around us all the time, and people are increasingly curious about possible answers.

Where does all this leave us? What *do* people believe in when they talk about life after death?

#### VARIETIES OF BELIEF

The main beliefs that emerge in the present climate seem to me of three types, none of which corresponds to Christian orthodoxy. There are still attempts at restating a more traditional view; I think, for instance, of William Golding's dark but stunning *Pincher Martin*. But in general the mood is that traditional beliefs, both in judgment and hell and in resurrection, are actually offensive to modern sensibilities.<sup>5</sup>

First, some believe in complete annihilation; that is at least clean and tidy, however unsatisfying it may be as an account of human

destiny. This, presumably, is what lies underneath Dylan Thomas's angry outburst at the death of his father:

Do not go gentle into that good night.  
Rage, rage, against the dying of the light.<sup>6</sup>

But not many can sustain complete denial of any future life. Look at the religion section of the average bookshop, and you will find that more and more people today seem to believe in some form of reincarnation. This is not confined to practicing Hindus and half converts like Glen Hoddle. In the gruesome but fascinating novel by Will Self, *How the Dead Live*, his central character, a grumpy London woman recently deceased and living in a ghostly parody of London, discovers that she will be condemned to regular reincarnation unless she manages to grasp at what her underworld guide calls "the hooks and eyes of grace," through which, it seems, she will be able to escape the continual circle:

Still one last chance to get off the go-round, girl. Still time to attach you to the hooks and eyes of grace. If you want it. If you can just—even for a few instants—achieve a one-pointedness of thought.<sup>7</sup>

But she doesn't and is reborn—as an unhappy baby, destined to a short and brutal life. Will Self seems to envisage a kind of Hinduism, where the mental achievement of brief, focused thought, replacing the wandering and distracted mind or soul, is the key to escaping the cycle, the ever-rotating wheel, of death and birth. A different twist on reincarnation is provided by the many for whom—again to judge from the literature available—it has become a way of pursuing psychoanalysis by other means, discovering aspects of your personality that come from who you were or what happened to you in a previous life. It thus flows into the larger New Age culture in which bits and pieces of esoteric beliefs are mixed with dreams of self-help and self-fulfillment.

Also on the fringe of New Age ideas is a revival of the views we discovered in Shelley, a sort of low-grade, popular nature religion with elements of Buddhism. At death one is absorbed into the wider world, into the wind and the trees. The anonymous poem left, in case of his death, by a soldier going to Northern Ireland expresses it well:

Do not stand at my grave and weep;  
I am not there. I do not sleep.  
I am a thousand winds that blow.  
I am the diamond glints on snow.  
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.  
I am the gentle autumn rain.  
.....  
Do not stand at my grave and cry;  
I am not there. I do not die.<sup>8</sup>

After Diana's death one message left in London spoke as in the princess's own voice: "I did not leave you at all. I am still with you. I am in the sun and in the wind. I am even in the rain. I did not die, I am with you all."<sup>9</sup> Many funerals, memorial services, and even funerary inscriptions now give voice to this kind of belief. Many would-be Christians try to persuade themselves and others that this kind of ongoing life is really what is meant by traditional teaching either about the immortality of the soul or the resurrection of the dead. Others, however, like the highly successful children's writer Phillip Pullman, who takes something like this line, make it pretty clear that he is thereby attacking and deconstructing traditional Christian belief and offering something else instead.<sup>10</sup>

The funeral practices that have grown up, or reappeared, in our own day exhibit the same kind of confusion. The practice of putting objects in coffins along with the dead to comfort or help them in the life to come was until recently described by students of culture as an interesting practice now abandoned in the modern West; but gifts for the dead are making a comeback, with photographs, jewelry,



teddy bears, and the like being placed in coffins.<sup>11</sup> Nigel Barley relates stories, told by a crematorium official, of widows placing in the coffin a packet of digestive biscuits or the deceased's spare glasses and false teeth. On one occasion a widow put into her husband's coffin two cans of the spray adhesive that the dead man had used to paste on his toupee, causing an explosion that bent the furnace door.<sup>12</sup> What sort of belief, if any, does all this reflect?

Finally, at the popular level, belief in ghosts and the possibility of spiritualistic contact with the dead has resisted all the inroads of a century of secularism. When I first delivered in Westminster Abbey the series of lectures that became this book, the Abbey's weekly newsletter advertising the first lecture also announced that one of the Abbey's very own seventeenth-century ghosts might make his annual appearance around the same time. And there are of course numerous popular phenomena on both sides of the Atlantic, such as the continuing Elvis cult in the United States, that need categories of their own to be described.

I take it that I am describing a world my readers will recognize. My aim is not to catalog it exhaustively but to draw attention to certain features of it as well as to the striking fact that not only is it quite unlike anything that can be called orthodox Christian belief but also, so far as I can tell, *most people simply don't know what orthodox Christian belief is*. It is assumed that Christians believe in life after death, as opposed to denying any survival after death, and that every sort of life after death must therefore be the same kind of (Christian) thing. The idea that "life after death" might include variations embodying significantly different beliefs about God and the world, and significantly different agendas for how people might live in the present, has simply never occurred to most modern Western people. In particular, most people have little or no idea what the word *resurrection* actually means or why Christians say they believe it.

What is more worrying, this multiple ignorance seems often to be true in the churches as well. This is the subject of the next chapter.

## 2. PUZZLED ABOUT PARADISE?

### CHRISTIAN CONFUSION ABOUT HOPE

One of the most frequently quoted Anglican sermons of the twentieth century is also, alas, one of the most misleading. In a widely used guide to arranging secular funerals, words by Canon Henry Scott Holland of St. Paul's are quoted as the preface, and thousands of people request that they be read at funerals and memorial services:

Death is nothing at all. It does not count. I have only slipped away into the next room. Nothing has happened. Everything remains exactly as it was. I am I and you are you, and the old life we lived so fondly together is untouched, unchanged. Whatever we were to each other, that we still are. Call me by the old familiar name. Speak of me in the easy way which you always used. Put no difference into your tone. Wear no forced air of solemnity or sorrow. . . . Life means all that it ever meant. It is the same as it ever was. There is absolute and unbroken continuity. What is this death but a negligible accident? Why should I be out of mind because I am out of sight? I am waiting for you, for an interval, somewhere very near, just around the corner. All is well. Nothing is hurt; nothing is lost. One brief moment and all will be as it was before. How we shall laugh at the trouble of parting when we meet again!<sup>1</sup>

What nobody usually points out is that this was not the view that Scott Holland himself was advocating. It was simply what, he suggested, came to mind as we "look down upon the quiet face" of "one who has been very near and dear to us." Elsewhere in the same sermon, preached in 1910 upon the death of King Edward VII, he spoke of the other feelings that also are raised by death, which seems "so inexplicable, so ruthless, so blundering . . . the cruel ambush into which we are snared . . . It makes its horrible breach in our gladness with careless and inhuman disregard of us. . . . Beyond the darkness hides its impenetrable secret. . . . Dumb as the night, that terrifying silence!"

Scott Holland went on to attempt something of a reconciliation between these two views of death. The Christian has, according to the New Testament, "already passed from death to life" so that the further transition of actual death ought not to be as terrifying as it appears. In addition, we should (he suggests) think of the life beyond death in terms of a continuation of the growth in the knowledge of God and in personal holiness that has already begun here. That raises questions we cannot address at this stage of the book, but it is already clear that to take the paragraph so frequently quoted out of the context of the sermon in which it was originally spoken does serious violence to the author's intention. We can only wonder at the extraordinary denial that is going on when this is done. It amounts to a resolute refusal to tell the truth about the real and savage break, the horrible denial of the goodness of human life, that every death involves. I would love to think that one of the effects of the present book would be to challenge the use of the Scott Holland piece in Christian funerals. It offers hollow comfort. By itself, without comment, it simply tells lies. It is not even a parody of Christian hope. Instead, it simply denies that there is any problem, any need for hope in the first place.

Contrast with that well-known piece the robust attitude of a classic Christian theology, stated by the sometime dean of St. Paul's, John Donne:

Death be not proud, though some have called thee  
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;

For those who thou think'st thou dost overthrow  
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,  
Much pleasure—then, from thee much more must flow;

And soonest our best men with thee do go,  
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.

Thou'rt slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,  
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,

And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well,  
And better than thy stroke. Why swell'st thou then?

One short sleep past, we wake eternally,  
And death shall be no more. Death, thou shalt die.<sup>2</sup>

At first sight this might seem rather close to Scott Holland.

Death is nothing at all? Death is not after all mighty and dreadful? But no, the last two lines say it all. Death is a great enemy, but it has been conquered and will at the last be conquered fully. "One short sleep past, we wake eternally, / And death shall be no more. Death, thou shalt die." In the Scott Holland passage, there is nothing to be conquered. For John Donne, death is important; it is an enemy, but for the Christian, it is a *beaten* enemy. In line with much classic Christian thought, Donne sees life after death in two stages: first, a short sleep, then an eternal waking.<sup>3</sup> *And death shall be no more.* Donne grasped what we shall discover to be the central New Testament belief: that at the last, death will be not simply redefined but defeated. God's intention is not to let death have its way with us. If the promised final future is simply that immortal souls leave behind their mortal bodies, then death still rules—since that is a description not of the *defeat* of death but simply of death itself, seen from one angle.<sup>4</sup>

But I am running too far ahead of myself. The classic Christian position is stated in the early creeds, themselves dependent on the

New Testament in ways we shall explore later in the book. In my church we declare every day and every week that we believe in "the resurrection of the body." But do we? Many Christian teachers and theologians in recent decades have questioned the appropriateness of this language. One recent lavishly illustrated coffee-table book on the subject of death and the afterlife, devoting a bare four pages to the apparently odd idea of resurrection, declares blandly that "current orthodox Christianity no longer holds to the belief in physical resurrection, preferring the concept of the eternal existence of the soul, although some creeds still cling to the old ideas."<sup>5</sup> Let us again be quite clear. If this is true, then death is not conquered but re-described: no longer an enemy, it is simply the means by which, as in *Hamlet*, the immortal soul shuffles off its mortal coil.<sup>6</sup>

#### EXPLORING THE OPTIONS

There has been, in fact, an oscillation between two poles, which you can see by walking around any old church and looking at the monuments. Some envisage death as a horrid enemy, stalking its prey. This is often combined with the firm proclamation that, though an enemy, death will finally be defeated. Until at least the late eighteenth century, many tombstones and memorials were inscribed with the Latin word *resurgam*, which means "I shall arise," indicating that the now-dead person believed in an intermediate sleep to be followed by a new bodily life at some future point. That was why people were buried facing east, so as to rise to meet the Lord at his coming. We shall come back to this in the tenth chapter.

The other pole of belief is represented by St. Francis's hymn, "All Creatures of Our God and King," with its remarkable invocation of "And thou, most dear and kindly death, waiting to hush our latest breath." Many hymns, prayers, and sermons have tried to soften the blow by presenting death as a friend coming to take us to a better place; this was a familiar theme in the nineteenth century and has

its secular echo in the modern movements toward voluntary euthanasia. Thus Christian thought has oscillated between seeing death as a vile enemy and a welcome friend.

Traditionally, of course, we suppose that Christianity reaches about a heaven above, to which the saved or blessed go, and a hell below, for the wicked and impenitent. This is still assumed by many both inside and outside the church as the official line, which they may or may not accept.

A remarkable example arrived in the mail not long ago: a book, apparently a best-seller, by Maria Shriver, the present first lady of California, who is married to Arnold Schwarzenegger and whose uncle was John F. Kennedy. The book is called *What's Heaven?*<sup>7</sup> and is aimed at children, with lots of large pictures of fluffy clouds in blue skies. Each page of text has one sentence in extra large type, making the basic message of the book crystal clear. Heaven, says Shriver,

is somewhere you believe in. . . . It's a beautiful place where you can sit on soft clouds and talk to other people who are there. At night you can sit next to the stars, which are the brightest of anywhere in the universe. . . . If you're good throughout your life, then you get to go to heaven. . . . When your life is finished here on earth, God sends angels down to take you up to Heaven to be with him. . . . [And Grandma is] alive in me. . . . Most important, she taught me to believe in myself. . . . She's in a safe place, with the stars, with God and the angels. . . . She is watching over us from up there. . . .

"I want you to know [says the heroine to her great-grandma] that even though you are no longer here, your spirit will always be alive in me."<sup>8</sup>

This is more or less exactly what millions of people in the Western world have come to believe, to accept as truth, and to teach to their children. The book was sent me by a friend who works

with grieving children and who described this as "one of the worst books for children" and said, "I hope you find this awful book helpful in what not to say"! It is indeed a prime example of that genre. The truth of what the Bible teaches is very, very different at several levels.

It comes as something of a shock, in fact, when people are told what is in fact the case: that there is very little in the Bible about "going to heaven when you die" and not a lot about a postmortem hell either. The medieval pictures of heaven and hell, boosted though not created by Dante's classic work, have exercised a huge influence on Western Christian imagination. Many Christians grow up assuming that whenever the New Testament speaks of heaven it refers to the place to which the saved will go after death. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus's sayings in the other gospels about the "kingdom of God" are rendered as "kingdom of heaven"; since many read Matthew first, when they find Jesus talking about "entering the kingdom of heaven," they have their assumptions confirmed and suppose that he is indeed talking about how to go to heaven when you die, which is certainly not what either Jesus or Matthew had in mind. Many mental pictures have grown up around this and are now assumed to be what the Bible teaches or what Christians believe.<sup>9</sup>

But the language of heaven in the New Testament doesn't work that way. "God's kingdom" in the preaching of Jesus refers not to postmortem destiny, not to our escape from this world into another one, but to God's sovereign rule coming "on earth as it is in heaven."<sup>10</sup> The roots of the misunderstanding go very deep, not least into the residual Platonism that has infected whole swathes of Christian thinking and has misled people into supposing that Christians are meant to devalue this present world and our present bodies and regard them as shabby or shameful.

Likewise, the pictures of heaven in the book of Revelation have been much misunderstood. The wonderful description in Revelation 4 and 5 of the twenty-four elders casting their crowns before the throne of God and the lamb, beside the sea of glass, is not, de-

spite one of Charles Wesley's great hymns, a picture of the last day, with all the redeemed in heaven at last.<sup>11</sup> It is a picture of *present* reality, the heavenly dimension of our present life. Heaven, in the Bible, is not a future destiny but the other, hidden, dimension of our ordinary life—God's dimension, if you like. God made heaven and earth; at the last he will remake both and join them together forever. And when we come to the picture of the actual end in Revelation 21–22, we find not ransomed souls making their way to a disembodied heaven but rather the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, uniting the two in a lasting embrace.<sup>12</sup>

Most Christians today, I fear, never think about this from one year to the next. They remain satisfied with what is at best a truncated and distorted version of the great biblical hope. Indeed, the popular picture is reinforced again and again in hymns, prayers, monuments, and even quite serious works of theology and history. It is simply assumed that the word *heaven* is the appropriate term for the ultimate destination, the final home, and that the language of resurrection, and of the new earth as well as the new heavens, must somehow be fitted into that.<sup>13</sup>

What we see in today's church is, I think, a confused combination of several things. For one, the old heaven-and-hell view has been under attack. Many now refuse to believe in hell at all, but we find over the last century, as this denial developed, that paradoxically it has led to a diminution of the promise of heaven since if everybody is on the same track it would seem unfair to allow some to go directly to the destination rather than continue the long post-mortem journey. The idea of such a journey after death is itself now frequent, though again it has virtually no warrant in the Bible or early Christian thought. We see too the rehabilitation of a modern, sanitized, version of the old theory of purgatory: since at death we are all still quite unready to meet our Maker, we will need (it is suggested) a period of refinement, of growing toward the light. (People who think like this tend to prefer to put it that way rather than emphasizing purging or other uncomfortable things.)<sup>14</sup> Many embrace

a universalism in which God will endlessly offer to the unrepentant the choice of faith until at last all succumb to the wooing of divine love.<sup>15</sup> Some declare that heaven as traditionally pictured looks insufferably boring—sitting on clouds playing harps all the time—and that they either don't believe it or don't want to go there. Others declare, rather sniffily, that a God who simply wants people to adore him all the time is not a figure they would respect. Those of us who protest that the orthodox picture is of a vibrant and active human life, reflecting God's image in the new heavens and new earth, are sometimes accused of projecting our go-getting contemporary life onto the screen of the future.

#### THE EFFECTS OF CONFUSION

This many-sided confusion plays out in the hymns we sing, in the way we celebrate the Christian year, and in the type of funerals or cremations we have. A few words about each of these will show what I mean.

First, hymns. A glance through the average hymnbook reveals that a good many references to the future life beyond death are closer to Tennyson, or even to Shelley, than they are to orthodox Christianity:

Till in the ocean of thy love

We lose ourselves in heaven above.

The words are those of the devout John Keble, but it was he who was for a moment lost not in Christianity but in a drop-in-the-ocean Buddhist eschatology.<sup>16</sup> And what about his Oxford movement colleague, John Henry Newman, with his almost-Gnostic line?

So long thy power hath blest me, sure it still

Will lead me on,

O'er moor and fen, o'er crag and torrent, till

The night is gone.

And with the morn those angel faces smile

Which I have loved long since, and lost awhile.

Did Newman *really* believe that he had a previous life with the angels, whether before his conception or in early childhood, and that he would return there in due course? And—though of course the idea of the lonely pilgrim following the “kindly light” across the moors and fens is a powerful, romantic idea—did he really think that the present world and the present life could be described simply as “night”?<sup>17</sup>

Or what about the blarant Platonism of the hymn “Abide with Me,” still a favorite in some circles?

Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee.

There are entire hymns and anthems that embody this train of thought. In a quick flip through the hymnbook, I noted dozens of other examples, not all explicable by the process of selection at a time when the prevailing theology wanted to say that sort of thing.

Or what about the Christmas hymn “It Came upon the Midnight Clear,” which declares in the final verse that

For lo! the days are hastening on

By prophet bards foretold,

When, with the ever-circling years

Comes round the age of gold.

When peace shall over all the earth

Its ancient splendors fling.

And the whole world give back the song

Which now the angels sing.

It's a well-loved Christmas carol, but the idea of cycles of history eventually returning to a golden age is neither Christian nor Jewish

but decidedly pagan. While we're on Christmas carols, consider "Away in a Manger," which prays, "and fit us for heaven, to live with thee there." No resurrection, no new creation, no marriage of heaven and earth.

Some of the hymns in the revivalist and charismatic traditions slip into the easy mistake, cognate as we shall see with misleading views of the "second coming," of suggesting that Jesus will return to take his people away from earth and "home" to heaven. Thus that wonderful hymn, "How Great thou Art," in its final stanza, declares:

When Christ shall come, with shout of acclamation,  
And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart.

The second line (to anticipate our later argument) might better read, "And heal this world, what joy shall fill my heart." Actually, the original Swedish version of the hymn doesn't talk about Christ coming to take me home; that was the translator's adaptation. Rather, it speaks of the veils of time falling, faith being changed into clear sight, and the bells of eternity summoning us to our Sabbath rest, all of which has a lot more to recommend it.<sup>18</sup>

Some hymns, of course, stand out against this trend. "Jerusalem the Golden" draws attention to the decisive final chapters of Revelation. A few hymns speak of being "woken by the last dread call" or of "rising glorious at the last day." One great hymn speaks of God working his purpose out so that "the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea." But, towering over all these, is the great All Saints' Day hymn, "For All the Saints," whose sequence of thought catches the New Testament emphasis exactly right. After celebrating the life of the saints in the opening verses, our communion with them in the fourth, and their strengthening of us in the fifth, the sixth verse speaks of our joining them in their present abode, which is *not* the final resting place but rather the intermediate place of rest, joy, and refreshment, for which one name is paradise:

The golden evening brightens in the west;  
Soon, soon to faithful warriors comes their rest;  
Sweet is the calm of paradise the blest.  
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Only *after* that does the resurrection occur:

But lo! there breaks a yet more glorious day;  
The saints triumphant rise in bright array;  
The King of glory passes on His way.  
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Which leads in to the triumphant final verse, arriving at last in the new Jerusalem.<sup>19</sup>

If our hymns reveal the confusion we have got ourselves into, the way many mainstream Christians keep the Christian year shows much the same thing. I have written elsewhere about the sheer muddle that has, in recent years, allowed a two-day festival, if you can call it that, of All Saints and All Souls, preceded yet more confusingly by Halloween.<sup>20</sup>

What's more, Christmas itself has now far outstripped Easter in popular culture as the real celebratory center of the Christian year—a move that completely reverses the New Testament's emphasis. We sometimes try, in hymns, prayers, and sermons, to build a whole theology on Christmas, but it can't in fact sustain such a thing. We then keep Lent, Holy Week, and Good Friday so thoroughly that we have hardly any energy left for Easter except for the first night and day. Easter, however, should be the center. Take that away and there is, almost literally, nothing left.

The same confusions are apparent in the ways we do funerals. Many new funeral rites have been penned and published in recent years, often after lengthy debates. But before we get to them, a word about the implicit theology held by many of those who opt for cremation rather than burial. Reasons of hygiene and overcrowding led

reformers toward the end of the last century to propose this step, which, as not all Western Christians know, is still firmly opposed by the Eastern Orthodox (despite the shortage of land in Greece at least) as well as by Orthodox Jews and Muslims. But cremation tends, classically, to belong with a Hindu or Buddhist theology, and at a low-grade and popular level, as we have already seen, that is the direction toward which our culture is rapidly moving. When people ask for their ashes to be scattered on a favorite hillside or in a well-loved river or along a shoreline, we can sympathize with the feeling (though not, perhaps, with denying the bereaved a specific spot to visit in their grief). But the underlying implication, of a desire simply to be merged back into the created world, without any affirmation of a future life of new embodiment, flies in the face of classic Christian theology.

I am not of course saying that cremation is heretical. I shall speak in due course about its relation to the resurrection body. I am merely noting that the huge swing toward it in the last century reflects at least in part some of the confusions, both in the church and in the world, that we have observed. I also note in passing that a ceremony in a building that is used for nothing else is a very different event from a funeral, whether or not followed by cremation, in a building that is used daily and weekly for prayer, Eucharist, celebration, for baptisms and weddings, for the whole worshipping life of a community. Or, to look at it another way, there is something wonderful and profound about entering church through the churchyard, where are buried those who worshipped there in centuries past. But all that too is another story.

When it comes to funerals themselves, the confusion elsewhere is reflected quite faithfully (if that's the right word). So much goes on in different churches that I can only comment selectively and in relation to my own church (the Church of England). Spot checks elsewhere indicate that it is not untypical. Resurrection itself has not disappeared entirely, but again and again it is pushed to the margins, and the underlying story told in the service about the recently de-

ceased is not (as it would be were it in line with the New Testament) about their resting peacefully in anticipation of the final renewal of all things but about their going on a journey to end up in "God's kingdom." One could put it like this: if someone came to these funeral services with no idea of the classic Jewish and Christian teaching on the subject, the funeral services would do little to enlighten them and plenty to mislead them or confirm them in their existing muddle. I hope that those who take seriously the argument of this present book will examine the current practice of the church, from its official liturgies to all the unofficial bits and pieces that surround them, and try to discover fresh ways of expressing, embodying, and teaching what the New Testament actually teaches rather than the mangled, half-understood, and vaguely held theories and opinions we are meeting in these first two chapters. Frankly, what we have at the moment isn't, as the old liturgies used to say, "the sure and certain hope of the resurrection of the dead" but the vague and fuzzy optimism that somehow things may work out in the end.

As the argument of this book develops, it will become clear that we cannot simply regard this as a problem at which we simply shrug our shoulders and say, "Well, there are different views on these topics." What we say about death and resurrection gives shape and color to everything else. If we are not careful, we will offer merely a "hope" that is no longer a surprise, no longer able to transform lives and communities in the present, no longer generated by the resurrection of Jesus himself and looking forward to the promised new heavens and new earth.

Hymns, the Christian year, and ceremonies of death all tell a similar story. Perhaps equally important is the larger theology, and the wider worldview, accompanying the contemporary muddle.

#### WIDER IMPLICATIONS OF CONFUSION

What role does a belief in life beyond the grave play within the larger issues that face us in Christian life and thought?

Karl Marx famously spoke of religion as the opium of the people. He supposed that oppressive rulers would use the promise of a joyful future life to try to stop the masses from rising in revolt. That has indeed often been the case. But my impression is that religion is an "opium" when the religion in question includes the Platonic downgrading of bodies and of the created order in general, regarding them as the "vain shadows" of earth, which we happily leave behind at death. Why try to improve the present prison if release is at hand? Why oil the wheels of a machine that will soon plunge over a cliff? That is precisely the effect created to this day by some devout Christians who genuinely believe that "salvation" has nothing to do with the way the present world is ordered.

By contrast, it has often been observed that the robust Jewish and Christian doctrine of the resurrection, as part of God's new creation, gives more value, not less, to the present world and to our present bodies. What these doctrines give, both in classic Judaism and in classic Christianity, is a sense of continuity as well as discontinuity between the present world (and the present state), and the future, whatever it shall be, with the result that what we do in the present matters enormously. Paul speaks of the future resurrection as a major motive for treating our bodies properly in the present time (1 Corinthians 6:14), and as the reason not for sitting back and waiting for it all to happen but for working hard in the present, knowing that nothing done in the Lord, in the power of the Spirit, in the present time will be wasted in God's future (1 Corinthians 15:58). To this we shall return.

The classic Christian doctrine, therefore, is actually far more powerful and revolutionary than the Platonic one. It was people who believed robustly in the resurrection, not people who compromised and went in for a mere spiritualized survival, who stood up against Caesar in the first centuries of the Christian era. A piety that sees death as the moment of "going home at last," the time when we are "called to God's eternal peace," has no quarrel with power-mongers who want to carve up the world to suit their own ends.

Resurrection, by contrast, has always gone with a strong view of God's justice and of God as the good creator. Those twin beliefs give rise not to a meek acquiescence to injustice in the world but to a robust determination to oppose it. English evangelicals gave up believing in the urgent imperative to improve society (such as we find with Wilberforce in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) about the same time that they gave up believing robustly in resurrection and settled for a disembodied heaven instead. It would take a longer study than this one to see whether the same shift happened at the same time in the United States and elsewhere, but I would not be surprised to find that it did. We shall come back to this crucial theme toward the end of the book.

#### THE KEY QUESTIONS

I hope the brief survey offered in these first two chapters is enough to give at least a flavor of the confusing picture that meets us at every turn today in world and church alike. We must now list the key questions that underlie the whole book and glance ahead to the discussions, and indeed to the solutions, that I shall offer in the coming chapters.

The first two questions are presupposed throughout without having a particular chapter devoted to them. First, how do we know about all this? My own church, the Church of England, part of the worldwide Anglican Communion, declares that it finds its doctrine in scripture, tradition, and reason, taken together in their proper blend.<sup>21</sup> I suggest that a good deal of our current view of death and the life beyond has come from none of these but rather from impulses in the culture that created, at best, semi-Christian informal traditions that now need to be reexamined in the clear light of scripture. Scripture, in fact, teaches things about the future life that most Christians, and almost all non-Christians, have never heard of. Of course, the evidence of parapsychology and similar studies and of



so-called near-death experiences is not unimportant, but such evidence quite easily blends with the accumulation of folk wisdom. What we are here concerned with is going beyond that and investigating the often forgotten riches of the Christian tradition itself, with scripture at its heart.

Second, do we have immortal souls, and if so, what are they? Again, much Christian and sub-Christian tradition has assumed that we all do indeed have souls that need saving and that the soul, if saved, will be the part of us that goes to heaven when we die. All this, however, finds minimal support in the New Testament, including the teaching of Jesus, where the word *soul*, though rare, reflects when it does occur underlying Hebrew or Aramaic words referring not to a disembodied entity hidden within the outer shell of the disposable body but rather to what we would call the whole person or personality, seen as being confronted by God. As to immortality, 1 Timothy 6:16 declares that only God himself has immortality, and 2 Timothy 1:10 declares that immortality has only come to light, and hence is presumably only available, through the gospel. In other words, the idea that every human possesses an immortal soul, which is the "real" part of them, finds little support in the Bible.

Third, the starting point for all Christian thinking about this topic must be Jesus's own resurrection. But to understand Jesus's resurrection and what it meant to the first disciples and why they drew from it the conclusions they did, we must look at issues of life after death in Jesus's own world, the world of first-century Judaism, with its Old Testament roots and its context in Greece and Rome. So the third chapter will examine what the ancient world believed about life after death and the radical and revolutionary nature of the Jewish belief in resurrection, which flourished at Jesus's time; and the fourth chapter will ask, in that context, what can we say about the resurrection of Jesus himself?

This will project us forward into the second and central part of the book, in which I shall ask, what then is the ultimate Christian hope for the whole world and for ourselves? This divides into three

separate topics, each with its own further divisions: First, what can we say about the future of the whole cosmos? Second, what do we mean when we speak of Jesus "coming again to judge the living and the dead"? And, third, what should we mean by, and what should we believe about, "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting"? A further question goes with all this, but I believed it was so important that I turned it into a separate small book on its own:<sup>22</sup> Where are the dead now, especially the Christian dead? What can we say in the present time about them? Should we pray for them, or even *to* them? Is any contact permissible? What is the "communion of saints"? And, not least, how can Christians grieve appropriately? In the present book I summarize these topics in a single chapter, together with a section on the prospect of final loss.

Then, in the third and final part of the book, we come back from the past (part 1) and the future (part 2) to the present and ask, how can we appropriately celebrate and live by this very specific hope in our own day and culture? What will it mean, in particular, in terms of the church's mission and work in the world? What might "hope" look like, not just in the ultimate future, but nearer at hand? What surprises might there be in store there?

The whole book thus attempts to reflect the Lord's Prayer itself when it says, "Thy kingdom come, on earth as in heaven." That remains one of the most powerful and revolutionary sentences we can ever say. As I see it, the prayer was powerfully answered at the first Easter and will finally be answered fully when heaven and earth are joined in the new Jerusalem. Easter was when Hope in person surprised the whole world by coming forward from the future into the present. The ultimate future hope remains a surprise, partly because we don't know when it will arrive and partly because at present we have only images and metaphors for it, leaving us to guess that the reality will be far greater, and more surprising, still. And the intermediate hope—the things that happen in the present time to implement Easter and anticipate the final day—are always surprising because, left to ourselves, we lapse into a kind of collusion with

entropy, acquiescing in the general belief that things may be getting worse but that there's nothing much we can do about them. And we are wrong. Our task in the present—of which this book, God willing, may form part—is to live as resurrection people in between Easter and the final day, with our Christian life, corporate and individual, in both worship and mission, as a sign of the first and a foretaste of the second.

### 3. EARLY CHRISTIAN HOPE IN ITS HISTORICAL SETTING

#### INTRODUCTION

On Friday, October 25, 1946, at 8:30 p.m., in a large room in King's College, Cambridge, two of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century came face to face for the first and last time. It was not a happy occasion. Afterward, when those present compared notes, they could not quite agree on what exactly had happened.

The two philosophers were Ludwig Wittgenstein and Karl Popper. Wittgenstein had already established a reputation for brilliance; many were under the spell of his revolutionary ideas. He was the chairman of the Cambridge Moral Science Club (in Cambridge, moral science means philosophy). Many other philosophers, though, including Popper, regarded him with deep distrust. Popper was just making his name, having recently published the English translation of his masterpiece, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.<sup>1</sup> Both men had been brought up, as assimilated Jews, in prewar Vienna: Wittgenstein in a wealthy family with the world at his feet, Popper in a much more ordinary setting. Popper had longed for a chance to demonstrate the folly of Wittgenstein's ways, and now here it was. He had come to Cambridge to give a paper in which he would attack the great man head-on. It was a chilly evening; the fire was lit in the grate; and Wittgenstein was sitting beside it. Many of those present were, or would become, household names in philosophy: Bertrand