

St George's Book Reading Group

Tom Wright: God's Home-coming: The forgotten promise of future renewal: SPCK

It can be argued that life offers us just two key questions: What now? and What next? Looking at both Jewish and Christian history, you can well understand why there has been a strong temptation to answer the What next? question, where it refers to "after death", in terms that the cynic can describe as "pie in the sky when we die". "Good people" do have "bad things" happen to them in this life. So, the pie argument goes, Heaven will see goodness rewarded.....and, for those "bad people" who seem to have got away with it in this life, there is a temporary punishment period in Purgatory; or, if they still don't make the grade, an endless punishment period in Hell.

Tom Wright probes Old and New Testaments to produce a hugely erudite book that seeks to shift the emphasis. Basically, his conclusion is that what the Bible offers us is a message about partnership with God in this life to change the world for the better/bring in the Kingdom; after death, a waiting time in God's presence fulfilled with God's Spirit; and then the transformation of this world by God's coming to us in His Wholeness. That end and eternal stage will be in "bodily" form – though whether "body" means eating, drinking and going to the toilet is not clear. I think it does mean identifiable personality, rather than absorption into the infinite. And I think it does mean wholeness, both for those whose physicality fell well short of wholeness by the time they died; and for those who were born "disabled".

I wouldn't be too prissy about heaven on earth meaning the world as we know it now. If all those who have died in Shirley over the years came back to Shirley, there would be an accommodation issue. And then those who died in Shirley even as recently as 1926 would not recognise 2026 Shirley as their home.

There are a number of key messages in this latest Tom Wright book. Each reader will have their own list. Mine is, not in order of importance:-

1. While it is fine to have favourite Bible passages (we all do), the Bible is the whole Bible, and it can be very misleading to take bits in isolation, and would be very misleading to think you can focus entirely on the New Testament and forget the Old Testament.
2. Fortunately, the New Testament is shot through with Old Testament material. Given that Jesus was fond of quoting it, we would be very arrogant for us to ignore it!

3. Most of us are not going to get buried in Westminster Abbey, but each and every one of us is called to service, and all our service is part of the great scheme of things, however insignificant who we are and what we say and do may seem to us. (If God notices a sparrow dying, God certainly notices us saying please and thank you and giving someone a smile.)
4. Partnerships are important, however informal and temporary.
5. You might read this book as being all about and only about Jews and Christians. Nothing is more certain than that millions of people who are neither Jews nor Christians do God's will, partner with God, and one day are going to be part of God's Home-coming and rejoice with us.