

## **World Vision Australia – Our Christian Identity**

### **Statement 1 - Working with God to renew his world**

The New Testament book of Revelation, chapter 21, describes the wonderful consummation of the new heavens and the new earth at the final renewal of all things. The author of Revelation tells us that when this happens the world will be transformed into a place where “there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”<sup>1</sup> The old order of things is what the majority of the world experiences today – poverty, injustice, oppression, violence and corruption.

#### ***More than a humanitarian response***

The work of World Vision Australia (WVA), in conjunction with the broader World Vision Partnership, is to alleviate poverty and to fight against injustice and oppression in all its forms. Our motivation for doing this runs deeper than a humanitarian response, important though that is. Our motivation is rooted in our desire to work in partnership with God to renew the world that God created. This work of renewal is manifested in our actions of development, relief and advocacy - work that we see as participating in bringing the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

#### ***Heaven coming here***

It is crucial to explain at the outset that, contrary to much popular thinking, our final destiny is not ‘floating away to heaven when we die’. The passage mentioned above from Revelation describes heaven coming here. Heaven is the reign of God and is described as coming down to Earth where “God’s dwelling place is now among the people.”<sup>2</sup> When Jesus taught his disciples to pray for the kingdom to come on earth as in heaven, he was referring to heaven as the reign of God, not a place we go when we die. As N.T. Wright explains,

“the point about heaven is that heaven is the control room for earth. Heaven is the CEO’s office from which earth is run – or it’s supposed to be, which is why we’re told to pray for that to become a reality.”<sup>3</sup>

What this means is that salvation will be material; it does not mean that we will spend eternity in a disembodied bliss with Jesus ‘up in heaven’. We will have new, resurrected bodies, just as Jesus did at his resurrection. In addition to having new bodies, all of creation will be made new, as described in Romans 8 when “the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.”<sup>4</sup>

So, what does talk of the renewal of the world actually mean? To quote New Testament scholar, N.T. Wright, “what would it look like if God were running the show?” To answer this question, we need to go back to the beginning and look at what it is that needs renewing and why. This will help us form a foundation for our theology of working for justice, peace and reconciliation.

#### ***The renewal of creation***

---

<sup>1</sup> Revelation 21:4.

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 21:2-3.

<sup>3</sup> Wright, N.T., ‘On Earth as in Heaven’, a sermon at the Eucharist on the Sunday after Ascension Day, York Minster, 20 May 2007, [http://www.ntwrightpage.com/sermons/Earth\\_Heaven.htm](http://www.ntwrightpage.com/sermons/Earth_Heaven.htm), accessed on 24 February 2011

<sup>4</sup> Romans 8:21

The Genesis accounts of creation have been interpreted in different ways over the years and have been the cause of much controversy, with debates raging about issues such as the origins of the universe to the age of the earth. It is not our intention to discuss such debates here. Of relevance to WVA is what the creation accounts say about God and the universe that God created. These passages are hugely significant in defining the foundation for our work.

The most important fact that can be taken out of the creation accounts is that the universe that God created, and all that is within it, was 'good'. God liked what he saw, particularly his humanity which he described as being made "in the image of God."<sup>5</sup> This means that humans were made with the utmost dignity and significance. We have an inherent value as loved children of the God of the universe, which nothing can take away. More than anything else, this is the main claim of the creation accounts in Genesis. Rikk Watts says that the importance of stories such as those found in Genesis "cannot be overestimated. They define us. They tell us who we are and what it means to be human."<sup>6</sup> This therefore has enormous implications for how we are to treat both each other and the rest of the created order. Right at the beginning of the Bible, we are given the call to love what God loves.

A quick glance at the world around us though will reveal that we have not treated either our fellow human beings or the rest of creation with the dignity that the Creator instilled in them. Our tendency is to look after ourselves first, mostly at the expense of anything else around us. This causes untold suffering for millions of people and for much of the planet. The world is scarred and therefore needs renewing in every way – physical, social, emotional and spiritual.

This renewing of the whole of creation is what the story of the Bible works towards. Throughout the Old Testament there is the hope of a day when a king will reign with justice and fairness in a world which reflects His loving character. This message is regularly given through the prophets and the psalms. People such as Jeremiah and Isaiah, while denouncing the turning away of Israel from God, always point to the promise of a better future which God will instigate through His people. This is perhaps most clearly described in [Isaiah 65](#) which also illustrates the wonderful vision of a new heaven and a new earth. Jesus refreshed this hope in his life and work. As Rene Padilla says, "this interpretation is basic to the understanding of Jesus' proclamation of the good news of the kingdom of God."<sup>7</sup>

### ***In Jesus the kingdom of God has come***

Jesus described his own ministry by also referring to Isaiah. In Luke 4, Jesus quotes directly from the prophet, saying

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 1:27

<sup>6</sup> Watts, R.E., On the Edge of the Millennium: Making Sense of Genesis 1, <http://www.asa3.org/ASA/topics/Bible-Science/6-02Watts.html>, accessed on 20 December 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Padilla, R., 'The Kingdom of God and the Mission of the Church', in *Micah's Challenge: The Church's Responsibility to the Global Poor*, Hoek, M. & Thacker, J. (eds), Paternoster, Milton Keynes, 2008, p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> Luke 4:18-19.

Jesus then goes on to say to the people that this text has been fulfilled in their hearing. In other words, Jesus is saying that he is the embodiment of this good news. Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, sin and all that it entails has been done away with. This points to the holistic nature of salvation. As Tim Costello explains,

“Sin is the reign of evil and salvation is the overcoming of evil. Sin is expressed in hunger, injustice, sickness and spiritual alienation – in short, all that cripples the image of God. Salvation is expressed in food and justice, health and abundance that heals this crippled image. The good news is that we are called by God to partner with him to set things right.”<sup>9</sup>

Jesus referred to this salvation as the ‘kingdom of God.’ When Jesus said that the above text from Isaiah had been fulfilled in their hearing, he was saying that the kingdom of God was among them. In addition to referring to the kingdom of God 110 times in the gospels, Jesus also calls us to follow Him. In fact, 87 times in the gospels, Jesus says “follow me”. We are to emulate his life in the bringing in of the kingdom of God here on Earth.

The nature of life however is such that the kingdom will not be fully realised until Jesus returns and consummates everything. There is a ‘now and not yet’ nature to the kingdom. It has come into our midst in the person of Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit works in partnering with us to make the kingdom tangible. But it will not be complete until He makes it so. So the work that we do is not building the kingdom on our own, it is building *for* the kingdom, in anticipation, and with unshakeable hope, of its final renewal. Just as in Romans 6 Paul tells us that,

“in the new life of the Spirit [we] should produce radical transformation of behaviour in the present life, anticipating the life to come even though we know we shall never be complete and whole until then,”<sup>10</sup>

so we are to work towards justice and peace in the world now, with the Spirit empowering us in the same way, anticipating God’s final renewal of all things.

### ***Anticipating the final renewal of all things***

The fact that God is eventually going to renew the world does not mean we sit back and wait for Him to do it all. To the contrary, it motivates and inspires us toward passionately working in anticipation of the final renewal. The passion that God has for His creation is the great motivating factor behind what we do. It is the Spirit of God that fills us with the same passion. To sit back and wait for God to do it all would go against our very purpose for existence. As people made in the image of a creative, passionate God, we seek to imitate this God with the whole of our lives. German theologian Jurgen Moltmann says:

“If one hopes for the sake of Christ...in...the ultimate liberation of the world, he cannot passively wait for this future, and...withdraw from the world. Rather he must...strive for it, and already here be in correspondence to it in the active renewal of life and of the conditions of life.”<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Costello, T & Yule, R. (eds.), *Another Way to Love: Christian Social Reform and Global Poverty*, Acorn Press, Brunswick East, Victoria, 2009, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Wright, N.T., *Surprised by Hope*, SPCK, London, 2007, p. 233.

<sup>11</sup> Moltmann, J., *Hope and History*, in *Theology Today*, Vol. 25, No. 3 – October 1968, <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/oct1968/v25-3-article9.htm>, accessed on 7 February 2011.

As a result of this hope, everything we do in life matters. All our acts of kindness and care are preparation for the time when the kingdom is finally consummated. Just as Jesus bore the scars of his crucifixion in his renewed body after his resurrection, so there will be continuity between our present existence and the world to come. The work we do here will have its place in the renewal of creation. It is not in vain:

“We must consider that it is unreal to anticipate and work for the future if this future does not come toward us. The future in which we hope is never identical with the successes of our activity, for our actions are as ambivalent as we ourselves insofar as we are historical beings. The future must come towards us in order that our activity be "not in vain," as Paul puts it in the chapter on resurrection hope [1 Cor 15:58].”<sup>12</sup>

### ***Not done on our own***

With this knowledge that it is with God that we work to renew the world, we are fully aware that what we are working for is not a socialist utopia in which we have a kingdom without a king. We are not naïve enough to believe that we can ever achieve the kingdom of God on our own. As Guder explains,

“The announcement of God’s reign nowhere includes an invitation to go out and build it, nor to extend it. These are not New Testament ways of speaking about the reign of God.”<sup>13</sup>

If anything is testament to the fact that human nature simply does not have the power in itself to achieve this kind of world, it is the failed experiments of communism and socialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup> This is why the human heart also needs transforming. Working for the renewal of the world must involve personal transformation, or it will be incomplete. As Moltmann says,

“The transformations which one seeks externally through protest movements, through communes, and through struggles for the liberation of the oppressed, must come internally from the "hard core" of the Christian faith.”<sup>15</sup>

### ***The imperative of personal transformation***

Personal transformation is crucial to the work that we do. It is done in the power of the Spirit and transforms us as we work to transform the world. Jayakumar Christian puts it well: “A transformation that will equip the powerless to know the power of the kingdom cannot happen without the intervention of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>16</sup> It cannot be otherwise. If we do not live out the hope that we have, then how will others be convinced of it? As N.T. Wright adds,

---

<sup>12</sup> Moltmann, J., *Hope and History*, October 1968.

<sup>13</sup> Guder, D.L. (ed.), *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1998, p. 93.

<sup>14</sup> Additionally, in what may be hard to hear for many Westerners, capitalism cannot claim any moral superiority over communism or socialism. For capitalism too ultimately treats people as cogs in a machine, consumers to be bought and sold, rather than people of dignity made in the *imago Dei*, the image of God.

<sup>15</sup> Moltmann, J., *The Crucified God*, in *Theology Today*, Vol. 31, No. 1 – April 1974, <http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1974/v31-1-article1.htm>, accessed on 8 December 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Christian, J., *God of the Empty-Handed: Poverty, Power and the Kingdom of God*, Marc Publishers, Monrovia, 1999, p. 203.

“if the gospel isn’t transforming you, how do you know that it will transform anything else?”<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the imperative of personal transformation as part of the renewing of the world, we recognise that we deal with spiritual powers who seek to oppose our work. To ignore this reality would make us delinquent in our work. Jayakumar Christian explains that,

“The radical nature of our involvement does not lie in the fact that we are involved in justice issues and empowerment initiatives. It lies in the fact that we are confronting the whole gamut of the causes of poverty. In this, development theories based on an Enlightenment-oriented analysis of structures and causes of poverty fall short.”<sup>18</sup>

We do not work against enemies of flesh and blood (although that sometimes is the case), but we work against spiritual powers, as Paul explains to the Ephesian church.<sup>19</sup>

### ***The renewal of all things***

The renewal that we work for does not only include the human person; it also includes the environment, the planet which sustains the human population. We are reminded that God called the creation good before humans appeared. Humans are made in the image of God, but this does not negate the high value that God places on the rest of the created order.

That great statement of Paul’s in Colossians 1:19-20 says that “God was pleased... to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” Creation and salvation does not only include humans. Our goal is to work with God for the renewal of *all* things. Consider the words of N.T. Wright again:

“Our ultimate future isn’t just that we bumble along trying to live the present life a little bit better until one day we decay and die, and end up either in the grave or in a disembodied heaven or perhaps both. Our ultimate future is that we will be raised to new life in God’s new world, not only to inhabit God’s new creation, a world full of beauty and life and justice and freedom, but actually to run it on God’s behalf.”<sup>20</sup>

As we work towards the renewal of the whole creation, a world which we will run on God’s behalf, we need to recognise that we only do so in acknowledgment of the different attributes that all of us have been gifted with. Our work must be done in community. It must be done together. This is why we view the people we work with as partners. We do not work for them, we work with them, and we learn from each other. As Western Christians, it is easy for us to fall into the trap of believing that we have the expertise and the answers that our partners need. This is far from the whole truth, and to hold such an attitude would be arrogant. We recognise that we do not bring Jesus into the communities with whom we work. Jesus is already there and He invites us to work with him.

---

<sup>17</sup> Wright, N.T., 2007, p. 283.

<sup>18</sup> Christian, J., 1999, p. 202.

<sup>19</sup> Ephesians 6:12

<sup>20</sup> Wright, N.T., *Living in God’s Future – Now!* - Romans 6.1–11; Mark 16.1–8, sermon at the Easter Vigil in Durham Cathedral, Easter Morning 2009, <http://www.ntwrightpage.com/sermons/EasterVigil09.htm>, accessed on 3 December 2010

Our works of justice, personal transformation and environmental renewal all reflect the coming into history of the kingdom of God in Jesus. This is a taste of heaven - the rule of God - appearing in the here and now. It has been referred to as a peeling back of the curtain to reveal a little of what has always been there. The veil between God's rule and our present existence is very thin.<sup>21</sup>

### ***In the power of the Spirit***

Our dependence on God is also expressed through prayer, which is a crucial part of our work. It is an expression of humility and an acknowledgment of reality – the reality that we cannot do what we do alone, but that we need the help of almighty God. We recognise that we are dependent on God for all that we are and all that we do. Praying that God's will and not ours be done gives us confidence and strength to 'burn on and not burn out'.<sup>22</sup> It keeps the passion alive by constantly infusing us with hope to replace the despair that can so easily ensnare those who give their lives in working for justice and equality.

Our Christian faith also instils purpose within us. For WVA, working with God for the renewal of God's creation is not an optional extra to the 'real' or 'spiritual' work of getting people assured of their place in heaven. For us, working with God for the renewal of the world is central to the Christian message; it is working towards our ultimate hope of the new creation where all will be as it should be – the human heart will be transformed and conformed to the will of God, as will the rest of creation.

### ***Renewal as our mission***

When Jesus said to "seek first the kingdom of God"<sup>23</sup> he was not spiritualising it in the sense of God's rule over our individual lives. To seek the kingdom of God is to seek the rule of God in every way – individual, social, communal, physical, and spiritual. It is to seek justice, peace and all the things that reflect the character of the King. Consider Moltmann again:

"even though the kingdom of God is God's kingdom, it is also true that one must seek it in order to find it. Christian hope anticipates the future in the spirit of Christ and realises it under the conditions of history...we are construction workers and not only interpreters of the future whose power in hope as well as in fulfilment is in God."<sup>24</sup>

Working with God to renew the world is our mission. If the Gospel we try to live out is not about mission, then it is not the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The whole point of being a Christian is about being redeemed to work with God in preparing for the kingdom of God. It is not about sitting back and waiting for our heavenly reward, as if we are waiting for God to glorify us. The purpose of our being raised with Christ is for mission. And our mission is recognition that Jesus is Lord. As N.T. Wright says, "resurrection doesn't mean escaping from the world, but mission to the world based on Jesus' lordship over the world."<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> An example of this is shown in the story of Elisha and his servant in 2 Kings 6:15-19. When the servant, seeing the powerful Syrian army all around, laments to Elisha that they are finished, Elisha asks God to show him that 'there are more that stand on our side'. God then peels back the curtain so to speak, and shows the servant the armies of God all around. In a similar way, the unseen God works through us in ways that can be seen. God does through us what we cannot do ourselves.

<sup>22</sup> It is believed that this phrase was coined by Rev. John Smith.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 6:33

<sup>24</sup> Moltmann, J., *Hope and History*, October 1968.

<sup>25</sup> Wright, N.T., 2007, p. 247.

The reason we are so concerned about the plight of the poor in this world and for the restoration of justice for all peoples is because of our ultimate Christian hope. The physical resurrection of Jesus in history shows that death itself has been defeated, the kingdom of God has broken into history and that God cares for all of creation.

***Conclusion***

In practical terms, at WVA the main way we express our desire to see renewal is through our development work. WVA supports 236 Area Development Programs in 61 countries.<sup>26</sup> We aspire to see transformation and renewal in all its dimensions in these communities. It is our privilege to partner with God to work for this renewal. We work to bring God's reign in now, and we long for the day when it will be here fully.

---

<sup>26</sup> Figures obtained from 2010 Annual Report, available at <http://www.worldvision.com.au/AboutUs/CorporateGovernance/AnnualReports.aspx>