

*An exegesis focused on the ministry of Paul and its parallels with the ministry of Jesus. It is one of my favourite essays, and I think most successful, despite the fact that I manage to make history's greatest and simplest story seem complex – June 2007*

The Greek term 'apocalypse' is often equated in popular culture with the calamitous events portrayed in the last book of the Bible. Yet the actual meaning of the word is to 'uncover' or 'reveal' (that which is hidden), a somewhat ironic title for one of the most mysterious and cryptic texts ever written. Yet some of the most simple of ideas remain hidden, until it is time for them to be spoken. Jesus was reported to have paraphrased the prophets: "I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world"<sup>i</sup> and "then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all mankind together will see it."<sup>ii</sup>

Abraham started a monotheistic tradition that prophesied its culmination in the ministry of a man directly chosen by God, His 'Christ' or anointed. By fulfilling the predictions of the prophets who came before him, either deliberately or unwittingly, Jesus effortlessly demonstrated his commission.

The descendants of Abraham had evolved a complex set of rules for living a life that they believed was pleasing to God. Jesus came along and swept all those rules aside, replacing them with just two very simple rules. One, that we love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind, and two, that we love our neighbours as we love ourselves. Speaking on God's behalf, he extended God's love beyond Israel to encompass all people and all nations.

The incumbent Hebrew authorities perceived blasphemy in Christ's teaching and a consequent threat to their own salvation, and so they successfully agitated for his execution. They preached the fear of God, climaxing in their fear of His Christ, who instead preached the love of God.

Jesus declared God's ministry to be complete shortly before he died on the cross at Calvary. Several days later he was brought back to life, having been dead for less time than Lazarus had been several weeks earlier, and emerged from his opened tomb. After various encounters with some of his relatives and disciples, he departed from them. Because he could no longer be called upon to clarify his words, his parting message was that God would send the Comforter (the Holy Spirit) to guide them instead. He was able to confer this expectation because from the time of his baptism, Jesus and the Holy Spirit affirmed the intimacy of their relationship.

### **The Church is born.**

Fifty days after Jesus had been brought back to life, over a hundred assembled members of the Church suddenly entered into the same relationship with the Holy Spirit that Jesus had entered into at his baptism. The result of receiving knowledge of God, as had Christ through the Holy Spirit, was the rapid expansion of the Church into the society surrounding it.

In its infancy, the Church assembled under Peter as a loose collective. Everyone placed all that they owned at the apostle's feet, and everything was shared in common and according to need. Peter demonstrated that the Holy Spirit would not tolerate deception. A husband dropped dead suddenly, and soon after his wife the same, after each had independently presumed they could hide the truth of their innermost thoughts from God.<sup>iii</sup>

Saul the Pharisee was initially oblivious to this spiritual foundation of the Church. He saw it as merely another political uprising, and was actively suppressing it by arresting and jailing its members. All this changed when, on a journey to Damascus in search of more Christians to persecute, he himself quite suddenly entered into a relationship with the Holy Spirit, as had Jesus, and later his disciples, at Pentecost.

Such a dramatic and sudden change of heart became the motif of Paul's subsequent ministry. Gradual reform is the usual course of change in this world, yet Paul was to declare that everyone throughout the world "will be changed in an instant, in the 'blink of an eye', when the last trumpet sounds."<sup>iv</sup>

Christ had declared that the good news of the Kingdom of God must be proclaimed to all nations before the end can come.<sup>v</sup> After all, it is only fair that all humanity be presented with the facts, so that each and every person can then make an informed decision on their future. Thus to hasten the end, Paul embarked on a mission to proclaim the Gospel throughout what was thought, at the time, to be the four corners of the earth. Paul's mission ended with his execution in Rome under Nero.

The apostle John died of old age in Ephesus, the only apostle who would die of natural causes. While exiled on Patmos, he had received the definitive account of the conclusion to history, which he wrote down in the Apocalypse.

The common thread to all these characters, Jesus, Paul, John, is that they each had some sort of mystical encounter (presumably with the Holy Spirit) which fundamentally changed their perspective, and each felt compelled to relate their vision to others in their own particular style. Jesus spoke in parables (and also occasioned miracles), Paul spoke of things which are hard to understand and mysterious, and John drew upon ancient biblical imagery.

### **Getting to know Paul**

The challenge before the rationalist is to try and understand what was going on in the minds of these men to then lead them to their proclamations. None of them seems to have arrived at their positions through blind faith – quite to the contrary, they conduct themselves as if they have somehow obtained certain knowledge. What sure beliefs could have engendered their behaviour? In asking this, it does not matter if those beliefs had any basis in fact. For example, a belief in a world which is flat and has four corners, with other worlds above it and below it, would now be considered mistaken, but at the time, it was more than just 'reasonable', it was self-evident truth.

The clue to how they were thinking comes from Paul. "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me."<sup>vi</sup> Jesus also drew on the imagery of the 'child', instructing his disciples to address God as 'our father'. How then, can 'children of God' put childish ways behind them, and move on to become 'adults' of God? As Paul goes on to state it "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."<sup>vii</sup> Had Paul already glimpsed the complete story when he made this declaration?

Children are not equipped emotionally to properly understand for example, sexuality, and so as parents we shroud the details from them with euphemism. Did Paul perceive that humanity was likewise not yet prepared for the full truth about God? If we are human, then we have all set out to

deceive at one time or another, most commonly when we were children. When that deceit is challenged, we try to bluff our way through it. Some members of the church at Corinth were having trouble swallowing Paul's story of the risen Christ, and his claim that Isaiah's prophecy had come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."<sup>viii</sup> Paul declares, "If only in this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable."<sup>ix</sup> His declaration is ambiguous, for he is careful not to clarify the 'other' life he hopes for – he merely provides instead a poor reflection in a mirror.

### **Orthodox Belief**

The standard model of Christian theology is well established, and is centred on John's analysis that "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life."<sup>x</sup> The model begins with God creating man. Man rebels against God, chooses to go his own way, and thereby becomes mortal. God becomes man in Christ, and in an act of pure love, God dies on the cross in place of us. He takes over responsibility for all our waywardness, and thus overcomes mortality for anyone who chooses to accept the redemption on offer. Finally, at the end of time, God will return to judge both the living and the dead. Those who accepted the offer of salvation when it was still available will go on to live in eternal joy. Those who missed their chance, and rejected the offer, will go on to live in eternal damnation.

There are several problems and inconsistencies with this creed, which have been raised since the earliest life of the church.

A clear example of contradiction is John's claim that Christ is God's one and only son, when Christ himself (admittedly according to Matthew) addresses God not just as 'his' father, but rather as 'our' father, implying that we are all His sons and daughters.

Next, if God is all powerful, all knowing, and can do anything, then He would seem to be a contemptuous, even monstrous God, because He would have created man *knowing* that the design was predestined to go astray. To enter back into His world after the fact, and die for our sins, looks like He is merely fixing up His own faux pas rather than any mistake *we* might have made. Only a cynical God would deliberately create an imperfect world that becomes in effect a factory for producing souls, and then put in place a quality assurance department which tests each soul's capacity for accepting or rejecting His offer of salvation.

The more serious problem with this creed is that it claims Christ has already won the victory over death. While Jesus and Lazarus may have been brought back to life, a *child*, in all its innocence, would look at this world we inhabit, and protest that Christ has (quite obviously and literally, in truth) not yet finished the job, and is yet to win the victory over death. In this world we inhabit, someone somewhere dies every second of every day. This perishable body of ours has not been clothed with the imperishable – everyone grows old. This mortal body of ours has not been clothed with immortality – everyone dies.<sup>xi</sup> Even though I might believe in Jesus, and in every word he spoke, I nevertheless appear in fact to be falling apart. I do not seem to be destined for eternal life – rather, I appear destined for the grave.

The standard model claims that it is of course not the body that has eternal life, but rather an abstract entity that theologians call the 'soul'. Yet Jesus himself declared, "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living."<sup>xii</sup> Job declared that "although worms destroy this body, I will see God in my

flesh.”<sup>xiii</sup> Jesus was making the observation that Abraham, Isaac, and Moses were all living people when they professed that God was *their* God. Yet belief in a ‘soul’ that persists beyond the grave, leads on to Christ’s words being taken to mean that the Patriarchs are now ‘alive’ (in ‘Heaven’), even though their bodies have long since decayed.

## The Rapture

When as children we find out the truth, the revelation itself can be occasioned with shock, horror and anger, but it is often soon followed with acceptance and joy, like jumping into a pool for a swim. Paul spoke to the Corinthian Christians of Faith, Hope and Love.<sup>xiv</sup>

The sort of faith he imagined was the ability to move mountains.<sup>xv</sup> If God has sent a powerful delusion, a suggestion Paul makes to the Church at Thessalonica<sup>xvi</sup>, then it has been the doctrine, indeed the illusion, of materialism. The nature of the material world is generally so unflinching and consistent, that it is tempting to believe the world can only be as it appears. The belief in the certainty of death, and thus its elevation to an axiom, had engendered the invention of the ‘immortal soul’ long before Christ’s, or even the Patriarchs’, teachings on mortality.

Paul has heard the evidence of Christ’s miracles, and extrapolated by faith that every ‘atom’ of God’s creation is instantaneously and absolutely ‘configurable’ by God. He has overcome, in his mind, the grand illusion of a solid, ‘material’ world. In Paul’s understanding, it has become a small step to proceed from transforming water into wine, onto the moving of entire mountains, and ultimately, as he claims, living indefinitely.

We have already a glimpse of how a fully contingent world operates, in the ‘virtual’ worlds of the Internet. The detail of how the actual world we now inhabit operates, draws on fundamental results in computing science, and is the subject of another essay. Basically though, a ‘computer’ is fundamentally a *physical* machine which manipulates symbols according to pre-defined rules. A ‘universal’ computer can be ‘programmed’ to simulate another computer. The computer which is being replicated can be identical to the ‘real’ computer, except it has no material existence – it is ‘virtual’, comprised entirely of bits and bytes, of numbers, of mathematics.

In conventional thinking, it is always assumed that the simulated computer cannot be as powerful as the host computer, because that would contravene the laws of thermodynamics. However, those laws are themselves a contingency, rather than a necessity, of the world which is being simulated. We can thus allow the replica computer (which is just a string of numbers) to ‘host’ the original computer, and then do away altogether with the computer which was originally proposed to be made of ‘matter’. The result is a Universal computing machine (and of course an entire Universe) which has pulled itself up by its own bootstraps, and is made entirely of ‘nothing’ but numbers. This perpetual motion machine is only possible because there is no actual material, but merely numbers, and therefore no actual friction in its operation. The Ghost in this machine, the ‘software’ as it were, is Mind.

In this model then, all that exists is Mind and Mathematics, and what appears to be the material, is merely number (an abstraction), so that the only *actual* reality, is Mind. The mathematics keeps itself supported in the course of daily life without necessary input from Mind. While Mind is eternal, in the physical creation (a string of numbers), Mind firstly evolves life, and then having evolved an

opposed thumb, Mind further manipulates the world to His liking through Man. No one knows what Mind is, except that the Mind of God is just as capable as the Mind of Man. He has Man's intelligence, wit, and humour. Man could have no closer, more personal relationship with God. When Christ said "what you do to the least of these brothers of mine, you do for me"<sup>xvii</sup> he equated himself with God, and he equated all of us with Him. Our 'original' sin resides in the 'firmware' of our bodies. Our will drives our desire, from birth, for our particular 'experiential node' of the Mind of God to have greater access to resources than any other 'experiential node' of Mind.

The idea that the observed world is not material and 'real', but in fact merely spirit and 'virtual', was held by the Gnostics, and recast often by much later philosophers. In the case of the Gnostics, the notion led to some dubious moral conclusions and practices, for it suggested that if the world does not really exist, then neither does pain or suffering 'really' exist. Yet the *raison d'être* for God creating the world we observe, is precisely so that Mind can experience it, and ultimately reach emancipation. This dualism is stated throughout philosophy and religion. For Descartes, the Mind is separate from, but has its dwelling place in, the body. For the Christian, the Holy Spirit is separate from the body, its temple, but there within that temple the Holy Spirit has its dwelling place. For the Buddhist, the soul moves from one body to another.

However, because each individual is so obviously physically separate to any other, and also *knows* themselves to have a mind, a very strong illusion proceeds that we each have a separate mind, (and a separate soul) that is quite distinct (and separable) from any other individual's mind and soul. Did Paul conclude that in fact there is only one Mind, and that what makes our mind *seem* unique, is merely our 'experiential node', our body? If so, then the only thing which makes us individuals is the sum of our experience, and the ability of our will to either follow or reject the guidance of our Mind. If there is only one Mind, and that Mind dwells within each of us, then it would make sense that at the end of time, we will each see any other as literally the same person as ourselves, "face to face" as Paul describes it, albeit just in a different body.

## **Love**

To understand love, however, we have to consider these revelations which were given to Paul, but from Christ's perspective. Imagine a world which is completely contingent (not necessarily the way it seems), and one in which, as John puts it, "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away".<sup>xviii</sup> Imagine a world in which God provides not just the occasional miracle we hear of in the Gospels, but Universal healing and the abolition of degenerative processes. Then imagine you are Christ, a normal man, a simple carpenter from Nazareth, a place from which no one of any great importance has ever come before. Having received a calling, you go about your ministry. Because you have a direct conduit to the Mind of God, when you are told that Lazarus is dead, your Mind tells you he is only sleeping, and you merely declare that fact. When you are told there is no more wine at the wedding, your Mind tells you the vessels should be filled with water, and you merely deliver the instruction.

All this 'magic' is going well until your final entrance into Jerusalem, when the words of Isaiah gradually start coming back to haunt you. You realise the deal. God is going to let everyone live forever in love peace and happiness just like they did in the beginning, but there is just one

condition. You, Christ, are going to be the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. Through your death, everyone else will live. Everyone else will be going to Eternity except you!

If you knew that in death, you were going to meet the God the Father in Paradise, you (and any one of us) might as well just hurry up the process. But when instead you know that God is the God of the living and not of the dead, you will be taking every last encounter with friends and loved ones very seriously. It is only in this context that anyone can, if they try, begin to imagine Christ's passion. His selfless love for others reached its climax when, knowing that both his and their lives were about to end – completely – he yet found the courage to comfort those who were crucified next to him with a vain hope, assuring them that "today, he would see them in paradise".

We do not know with any certainty what happened to Christ after his resurrection. In an entirely contingent world (which is akin to a 'virtual' world), it is quite possible that he 'moved through walls' and 'walked on water'. After that interlude, it is most likely that he left the scene of his passion, to quietly live out his days. It is highly unlikely that he ascended in a literal sense, because as you rise, the air becomes rarefied, you lose the ability to breathe, and you eventually die.

However, the hope given to us by Paul, in very carefully constructed words, of eternal life, has been a powerful palliative. A person in this world who goes to the grave in all faith, does not just believe they are going to Eternity, rather, they *know* it as a certain fact. They depart with a peace that is not afforded to someone without faith. Their approach to the end is in stark contrast to those who know for a fact that they are going nowhere, or worse still, those who know for a fact that they are going to eternal damnation.

It is only natural to assume that eternal bliss, if it were ever possible, would come at a price. In one sense it has indeed come at a price, that of Christ successfully proceeding to the Cross, instead of walking away from the cross (which he could easily have done). Thanks to Jesus, the price has been paid, and does not need to be paid again.

However, at the end of time, it will be the Creator of the entire system, who will himself absolve anyone and everyone from any sin, whatever that sin may have been. For it was not something that we did wrong that led to our mortality, as was originally assumed. Rather, we now know that both Man and all the species that preceded us have in fact never been immortal. Mortality has been, throughout evolution, the Creator's most efficient way of accelerating our development into an enlightened being, one who is no longer a child, but an adult mindful of the needs of others. It is God, rather than His Christ, who takes on the sin of the world. He admits to the fact that the way we are is exactly as He always intended us to initially be. As the embodiment of God's Mind, it has been all of our late ancestors who have collectively paid the price for us who are alive, their children.

This then is how Paul knew that the change would happen in an instant. Once a child realises that it had been told an interim truth, and is now being presented with the final truth, it very quickly adapts to the new paradigm. Who, knowing the truth, would still want to terminate their embodiment, and leave a perfected world behind for some future generation, that which is destined to inherit the Earth, and live on into eternity?

If the 'flood' of the miraculous were to commence, we must first have clear knowledge of the rules of engagement as we proceed out of the land of the shadow of death, and on into life. That knowledge is precisely what Paul conferred to us through his Words.

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<sup>i</sup> Psalms 78:2, Matthew 13:35

<sup>ii</sup> Isaiah 40:5

<sup>iii</sup> Acts 5:1

<sup>iv</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:52

<sup>v</sup> Matthew 24:14

<sup>vi</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:11

<sup>vii</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12

<sup>viii</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:54

<sup>ix</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:19

<sup>x</sup> John 3:16

<sup>xi</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:54

<sup>xii</sup> Mark 12:27

<sup>xiii</sup> Job 19:26

<sup>xiv</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:13

<sup>xv</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:2

<sup>xvi</sup> 2 Thessalonians 2:11

<sup>xvii</sup> Matthew 25:40

<sup>xviii</sup> Revelation 21:4