



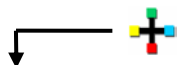
Journeys End In Lovers Meeting

1990

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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When I was learning Tamil I came to realise that there was no word for 'hope'. I asked my Brahmin teacher about this. He said: 'Hope is a meaningless word. What will be will be, and wanting something better won't change it.' I reflected on the use of 'hope' in English. Does it mean anything more than a wish? 'I hope it won't rain tomorrow', but it does! Yet the Bible speaks of hope as something sure and certain, an anchor of the soul (Heb 6:19). And life without hope is empty. Of course we have our little 'projects' which give meaning to life while we are working at them, but what is there in the end? Do they lead anywhere?

Hope is central in the New Testament, from the moment when Jesus says, 'The kingdom of God is at hand'. Something's coming! Sometimes the emphasis is on immediacy: 'It's coming soon; be ready!' Sometimes it is on delay: 'You do not know when the Master will come; be patient!' But whether the emphasis is on readiness or on patience one thing is sure: he will come. That gives a feeling of eager hope to everything.

The Church has found it hard to keep that alert patience. There have been groups who believed in the coming of the new world now, but most of the Church settled down and expected things to go on as usual. In the 18th and 19th centuries, when European intellectuals replaced the rule of God by the rule of human reason, the language of God's kingdom was replaced by the language of human progress. For most of two centuries the hopes of 'modern' people were centred on a vision of freedom and peace to be achieved by human planning. 'Pie-in-the-sky by-and-by' was a music-hall joke.

People no longer believe in progress. The dream has not come true. For the majority there is no real hope except to remain comfortable until the funeral undertaker arrives. For some there is hope of life beyond death, but it seems to be no more than hope for survival, not the eager and confident expectation of 'new heavens and a new earth'.

When Christians settle down to a comfortable accommodation to this world, it is natural that the teaching of Jesus about the breaking into this world of a radically new world (the so-

called apocalyptic teaching) should be played down. In much of 19th century Protestantism Jesus was reduced to the level of a moral teacher, and it was difficult to see why anybody should have wanted to crucify him.

Scholars in the present century have made it impossible to ignore the apocalyptic nature of Jesus' teaching but have sometimes resolved the problem by saying that Jesus was mistaken. And if crucifixion was the end of the matter we would have to say that Jesus was mistaken, but Jesus rose from the dead and the tomb was empty. And that really is the beginning of a new world, a new creation beyond the power of death.

If you are at home in the present world you may be inclined not to believe it. But if you accept Jesus' call to follow, and accept the witness of that Easter morning, then you will know that the new world is coming – because you have seen its dawning.

So what are we entitled to hope for? Not a world of perfect peace and justice on this side of death. And not merely survival for me and my fellow Christians.

We look forward with confident hope to what John gives us in the vision of the holy city coming to us as a bride adorned for her husband, perfect in beauty and splendour, a city into which all that is good in human history is gathered and perfected, and from which all that is evil is excluded. And if we know that this is how things are going to be in the end, then we start behaving that way now – in public as in private matters.

We do not see a straight road from where we are to that consummation. All our works are flawed. We ourselves and all our works are part of a world that decays and finally goes down into the abyss of death. But when we follow Jesus on the way he took, down into the abyss of death and dereliction, we know that on the yonder side of the abyss there is the glory of a new creation. It is for that we hope, and our hope is sure, an anchor of the soul.

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