

## Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2008 – Clergy Conference 2008

Talk by The Rt Revd David Atkinson, Bishop of Thetford

Taken from [www.norwich.anglican.org](http://www.norwich.anglican.org)

### **In the Lord your labour is not in vain**

1 Cor 15. 54 – 58

Matt 25. 31 – 46



***View of Delft, Jan Vermeer***

Taken from Olga's Gallery, [www.abcgallery.com](http://www.abcgallery.com)

This is my favourite Vermeer painting. It dates from 1660 and hangs in the Mauritshuis in the Hague. It is called “A View of Delft” - Vermeer’s home town. And remarkably it holds together and in tension many of the aspects of his view of life. Here is Edward Snow’s comment: “His greatest paintings generate conviction in an objective order of things permanently achieved, yet balance against that the impression of a world tenuously poised...distant and near, horizontal and upright, open and closed, heavy and light... such tensions exist in the very fabric of his world.” (p. 9f.).

And yet remarkably this probably wasn’t what Delft looked like then. It is not really accurate. The buildings are shifted, some of them smaller some of them taller. Some may not have been there at all. Just 6 years earlier a huge gunpowder explosion had destroyed large parts of the city, and killed the painter Carl Fabritius.

So what we have here is an ideal Delft - a vision of a city of peace which is perhaps more in the realm of hopes and aspirations than actually here and now.

That serves as a symbol of what is sometimes said of Jerusalem. The holy city, the new Jerusalem, city of peace, coming down out of heaven from God is not simply the Jerusalem which was devastated by the Romans in AD70, nor the Jerusalem of today where the Dome of the Rock stands as a sign of dispute between Jew and Muslim, or where in 1967 the homes of Palestinians were bulldozed to make room for the lovely new approaches to the Western Wall - pr where, even this afternoon, havoc has been created by a terrorist.

The new Jerusalem of the new heaven and the new earth is the symbol of the coming, transformed, resurrected new world, the symbol of the coming kingdom of Christ's glory.

So here is a Delft which is both now and not yet - a Delft of the present but also of hopes and expectations.

There is that about our present world which is given and with which we work and engage - and there is that which is in transition – awaiting for resurrection into something more, something richer and fuller and even more real.

St Paul captures this sense of anticipation in his letter to the Romans: “the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now.... Creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”

Here is the tension between the now and the not yet. That which is to come is a world set free, sharing in the glorious liberty of God's children. And the word which describes this transformation is resurrection.

What, we may ask, does this mean? The nearest the New Testament gets to describing what resurrection means is I think in the magnificent and difficult chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians, often read - or part of it - at funerals. St Paul speaks of the sowing of a perishable seed, and the raising of something imperishable. Just as a poppy seed produces a poppy flower, which shares the seed's identity - it is a poppy and not a daisy - but is transformed into something richer and more colourful - the poppy flower is very different from its seed, so resurrection includes both identity and transformation.

C.S.Lewis has drawn a picture of transformation at the end of *The Last Battle*. I know that Philip Pulman particularly dislikes this paragraph, but it seems to me very close to the thought of St Paul:

‘ “There was a real railway accident,” said Aslan softly. “Your father and mother and all of you are – as you used to call it in the Shadowlands – dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning.”

And as he spoke, He no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.’

And what does this vision of a new heaven and a new earth do to our engagement with the present world. For some it suggests abandonment and laziness. I saw a poster from a fundamentalist sect in America which said “Global warming - Rejoice! The Lord is coming”. I had a friend at college who did not see the point in finishing his research degree because the world might end before he had done it.

St Paul's view is quite the opposite: At the end of 1 Cor 15: "Therefore my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain."

That must have been an encouragement to a confused and divided Christian church - in the Lord your labour is not in vain. It can be an encouragement to us - to those of us struggling with trying to be faithful ministers of the Gospel when there is so little fruit for what we do - your labour is not in vain. To those of us seeking to be ministers of reconciliation for congregations that sometimes are at war - your labour is not in vain. To those of us who have done the same thing as faithfully as we can, week in and week out, and we can often get despondent and feel worn down - your labour is not in vain

What an encouragement in our daily discipleship, where we often get it wrong, get overcome with busyness or weariness, but God knows we are doing our best to learn to pray; not in vain in the Lord.

What an encouragement in our ministries, when so often we do not seem to be succeeding according to various peoples' criteria of success; when our congregations get older and we do not know how to attract the young. While we have much to learn, and much to change, and many ways in which to grow, we also hold on with gratitude to the phrase 'Your labour is not in vain in the Lord.'

So we engage with the world around us, knowing that all we do for good will be taken up, resurrected, and play its part in the new heaven and new earth.

It is precisely the light and the power and the hope of resurrection which energises us and motivates us to continue to serve God now. The future presses itself back on the world of today - the light shining from the End Time transforms the present moment. And we take back to our parishes and ministries that apostolic word of encouragement "you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain."