

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

I love the way the Nicene creed holds these big ideas together... resurrection... the promise that death is not the end... and then a new kind of life...

Already, we can see that implicit in the expression *the life of the world to come* is the idea that this world will end... But when and how?

Over the centuries, humans have imagined the end of the world as super near - think of how the New Testament writers often consider it (we got a hint of that in the gospel reading)... or all the hoopla around the end of the first millennium in some parts of Europe... and as regards the *how*, we've anticipated a comet like the one that wiped out the dinosaurs (did you see *Don't Look Up?*)... total nuclear war ... climate breakdown, or the zombie apocalypse... In our Western culture, we're talking scary sci-fi territory...

But Christianity, as we can see in the Nicene creed, proposes a different kind of approach: we look for... or perhaps you could even say we *hope* for... the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

Christianity is a religion of hope... one of the churches I used to work with had a lovely window with the motto *Dum spiro spero*... while I breathe, I hope... as if to say the very act of breathing is hopeful... as if we humans are wired to hope...

The gospel teaches us that we are looking for, hoping for the completion of God's great work... God's redemptive activity... Rather than dreading the heat death of the universe, we hope and pray for the coming of God's kingdom of justice and joy...

Today we're going to think about some of the big ideas and the hopes that stand behind the final statement in the Nicene creed:

First: Resurrection

Resurrection as it applies to humans or the creation in general derives all its meaning from the resurrection of Jesus. His new existence happens because God raised him... what we're saying is that will happen to us, too. Any continued existence I have is – just as my existence now – wholly a gift from God. Whether this happens at the moment of my death or at a single point in time for all of creation is something that I can't answer... there are lots of theories... but no-one to come back and explain it to us...

The great 20th century British artist Stanley Spencer was really interested in resurrection and produced a whole load of paintings of it. Many of them are set in his home village of Cookham in Berkshire... and include people he knew in real life... which I think is a lovely way of saying we hope for some recognisable continuity... albeit that, again, I can't be certain what that is. Spencer saw the resurrection in terms of relationship... he paints the places and people he knew and loved. I think that's a helpful insight: we might say the resurrection for us will be about relationship... Right now, we are known and seen and loved by God... but we creatures can't reciprocate ... The resurrection changes that... God will be as open to us as we are to God ...arguably that's what the words we heard from Revelation point to... that lovely picture of God dwelling with people, making Godself at home with people.

Next: Return and Judgment

The Christian tradition describes what happens at the end of the world as a general sorting out, a settling of accounts ... in the Old Testament, it's called *that day*... and has a double character... on the one hand, prophets anticipate a wonderful state where the lion will lie down with the lamb ... symbols that speak about the end of the hostility and evil that is baked into our world at present... on the other, they also describe a day of terror and wrath... the day of judgement ... It's the language that fills the *Dies Irae*, the medieval poem at the heart of the Requiem Mass (which, set to music turns up in plenty of horror movies...think *the Exorcist* and more) and informs many paintings in churches, from Ickleton to the Sistine Chapel...

These picture Christ in majesty, who, having returned to the world, takes his seat on the throne of judgement ... The Nicene Creed locates this as the final section of the story of Jesus: *he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead*, we say...as in the gospels where Jesus separates out the good guys from the bad ones, as sheep from goats...

What we have is a series of pictures, or scenes, where a drama is being played out. We don't know whether they are just giving us the vibe... or whether this is exactly what will happen... We don't know what judgment might mean, but we do know it's being done by God who is full of love and compassion.... And so we have hope: we trust in God's good judgement.

Last: A new heaven and a new earth

Another aspect of our hope as Christians is in the renewal of all things ... a kind of new beginning...

My thought world is heavily influenced by Talking Heads, who in 1979 sang *Heaven is the place where nothing ever happens*, but the Christian tradition has understood heaven as the place where God is... once thought of as literally above the vault of the sky (maybe with fluffy clouds...), it's also in the tradition been merged with the location of the afterlife for humans (paradise would be another word to use, just as Jesus at his crucifixion speaks to the penitent thief).

Revelation 21, that we heard earlier, talks about a new heaven and a new earth...creation transformed...That is where *the life of the world to come* happens. The noted absence of the sea is there to tell us that even the *possibility* of evil and disruption no longer exists... the sea being (in the culture of the time) the place of chaos and terror...where all the bad stuff happens

And what do we do while we are looking for or waiting for the life of the world to come? Well, first off, we engage in a more nuanced version of what you might do at railway stations and bus stops... someone (wiser than I) names it *active* waiting... you could call it simply living as citizens of the kingdom of God... We live as if God's kingdom were already here (as, indeed in some ways it is), ... so... working with God, we are good stewards of the planet... good carers for each other... treasuring what is right, as well as

sorrowing over and working to overcome what is wrong, confident that this is not all there is.

In a few minutes we'll share in holy communion, a sign of the heavenly banquet... a feast in which we are connected in loving relationship with each other and with God, as a hint, a taste of what is to come.

As we took a moment to reflect, we listened to some music from the 19th century that expresses what it is to hope:

Anonymous4: *The Shining Shore*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSedcE3VXns>