BOOK SUMMARY: VIRTUE REBORN (PART 1)

By Rebecca Walker


“What am I here for? How should I behave? Most Christians, faced with those questions, think in terms either of ‘rules’ or of ‘living authentically’. Both lead to problems. In this book, full of fresh biblical exploration, Bishop Tom Wright proposes instead that we inhabit the ancient tradition of virtue once again – but from a thoroughly Christian, not just a philosophical, perspective. The virtues are the strengths we need to get to our goal. Following on from his popular best-selling books Simply Christian and Surprised by Hope, he sees the goal in terms of the whole new creation, with humans renewed to look after it”.

About Tom Wright: “Tom Wright, until recently Bishop of Durham, is currently Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St Andrews and is a regular broadcaster on radio and television. He is the author of over forty books, including the For Everyone guides to the New Testament, the best-selling Simply Christian and Surprised by Hope, and the magisterial series entitled Christian Origins and the Question of God. His recent book, Justification: God’s plan and Paul’s vision, was shortlisted for the Christianity Magazine book of the Year 2009”.

VIRTUE: TRAINING FOR THE MOMENT WHEN IT COMES

Virtue Reborn follows on from Simply Christian and Surprised by Hope arguing for a framework of Christian character based on the eschatological vision of the resurrection of the dead and God bringing heaven and earth together, a plan that God has inaugurated in Jesus Christ. To understand how Christian life should be lived in the present, we need to know the “final goal for which we have been made and redeemed. The better we understand that goal, the better we shall understand the path towards it” (p. ix).

The New Testament utilises ancient ideas about virtue, and redevelops them “within the framework of the new life which the early Christians discovered and celebrated” (p. x). The word in Latin for “strength”, is the word from which we get “virtue”. Virtue Reborn is about the rebirth in early Christianity “of the ancient notion of virtue, within a quite new framework; and about the rebirth, in each human being, of those strengths which together enable us to be more human” (p.x).

When western culture talks about what a person should do, it is usually answered in one of two ways. Either, a person should find the applicable rules for conduct and then just does that, or they should ‘follow their heart’, follow their dreams (p. 5). Jesus did not go with either of these approaches. When the rich young ruler inquired what he should do, Jesus did not tell him to obey another law, nor did he tell him to follow his heart. Rather he pointed him towards a lifestyle of choices that would bring about a character transformation.

“Jesus... backed up by the early Christian writers, speaks repeatedly about the development of a particular character. Character—the transforming, shaping, and marking of a life and its habits—will generate the sort of behaviour that rules might have pointed toward but which a ‘rule-keeping’ mentality can never achieve. And it will produce the sort of life which will in fact be true to itself—though the ‘self’ to which it will at last be true is the redeemed self, the transformed self, not the merely ‘discovered’ self of popular thought” (p 19).

THE TRANSFORMATION OF CHARACTER

Character “is the pattern of thinking and acting which runs right through someone, so that wherever you cut into them (as it were), you see the same person through and through. Its opposite would be superficiality” (p 25). The character which Jesus talked about as signs of the Christian life do not come automatically. Rather you have to develop them, making “conscious choices to allow the Holy Spirit to form your character in ways that, to begin with, seem awkward and ‘unnatural.’ Only in that way can you become the sort of person who will react instantly to sudden challenges with wisdom and good judgement” (p 25).

Character is transformed by three things, aiming at the right goal, figuring out the
steps to get to that goal, and those steps becoming habitual (p 37). The goal for Christians is the new creation; the people we will be after our resurrection from the dead (p 29); a royal priesthood. God’s new creation started with Jesus, so he is a good summary statement of what the ‘fully formed, fully flourishing Christian character’ (p 29) looks like. This is what we are aiming for: “Christian living in the present consists of anticipating this ultimate reality through the Spirit-led, habit-forming, truly human practice of faith, hope, and love, sustaining Christians in their calling to worship God and reflect his glory into the world” (p 59-60).

This means that when we approach ethical questions, we should use the larger category of God’s purpose for the entire human life. Christian behaviour needs to be seen in the context of the call of God to be a royal priesthood that reflects God to creation, and creation to God.” The question of content, of how to know what to do, is not then confined to particular ‘ethical’ dilemmas, but opens up as a vocation to the whole of one’s life” (p 61).

PRIESTS AND RULERS

When God created the cosmos he had a future in mind for it. He then created humans as the means by which he would bring his creation to that future he intended. “The garden, and all the living creatures, plants and animals, within it, are designed to become what they were meant to be through the work of God’s image-bearing creatures in their midst” (p 65). The garden, which represents the temple, the place of God’s dwelling, was supposed to be extended into the rest of creation. Humans were supposed to bring that about. “Human is thus a kind of midway creature: reflecting God into the world, and reflecting the world back to God. That is the basis for the ‘truly human’ vocation. And that, as the New Testament declares, is also the goal for which we are aiming—indeed, the goal of all human existence… The Christian vision of virtue is the pathway toward this goal” (p 65).

To be made in God’s image is a metaphor for the rule of God through humans. The ‘image’ is not an aspect of human nature that is especially like God, rather “just as ancient rulers might place statues of themselves in far-flung cities to remind subject peoples who was ruling them, so God has placed his own Image, human beings, into his world, so that the world can see who its ruler is. Not only see, but experience” (p 67). The early church believed that in Jesus the original vision for creation had been restored through Jesus’ inauguration of the Kingdom of God (p 67).

Revelation ends in a similar place to where Genesis starts. “In the new heavens and new earth, there will be new vocations and new tasks, the ultimate fulfilment of those given to Human in the first place. Once we glimpse this, we will be in a position to see how the New Testament’s vision of Christian behaviour has to do… with the learning of the language, in the present, which will equip us to speak it fluently in God’s new world” (p 68). In the new city, the two vocations will be worshipping and reigning (p 68). If that is the reason we were made, and are being remade, then the question is in what way is that end anticipated in the present? How can we live into that reality now? “How do we learn, in the present, the habits of mind and heart which point us in the direction of this eventual ‘reign’?” (p 80). The answer is twofold: through holiness and prayer (p 80).

THE KINGDOM COMING AND THE PEOPLE PREPARED

In this context, a lot of what Jesus had to say about the coming kingdom, and the role of his followers makes more sense. He talked a lot about God’s coming rule over the whole world, and the ways in which his followers should anticipate the role they will have in that future (p 87). Take for example the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes. Jesus tells his followers “be perfect, because your heavenly father is perfect (5.48). The Greek is teleios… ‘goal’. You must be people of the goal, people of genuine humanness, people who are ‘complete’… in each case the ‘perfection’ in question consists not of a long list of hard moral commands dutifully obeyed but of a character formed by overflowing generous love” (p 94). Living this way is a sign of the new life, a “part of that radical Christian modification of the ancient Greek notion of virtue, the modification that quickly settled into the overall pattern of faith, hope, and love” (p 92).

To be continued next week!