

Heaven

Acts 7:55-60; John 14:1-14

Though it's sometimes been hard to concentrate, the lockdown has been good for some readers to catch up on their 'to-read' pile of books. I wonder how many of you have been buried under the rib-cage-crushing weight of Hilary Mantel's latest and final novel in the trilogy on Thomas Cromwell. Not a book to take with you for bed-time reading – not only because of the subject matter, but also the sheer physical weight of it. But it's a terrific read.

A clergy friend a few weeks ago drew my attention to a book I didn't know. Written by the American author Mitch Albom, it has the beguiling title, '*The Five People You Meet in Heaven*'. One critic has described it as, "Simply told, sentimental and profoundly true, ...like Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, it reminds us of what really matters here on earth, of what our lives are given to us for..."

Without telling you too much, it's a deeply moving story about an old man called Eddie who dies and goes to heaven. When he's there, he discovers that everybody in heaven has to meet five people, and these five people, whom you may have known well or hardly at all, explain to you something about your life that you didn't know and teach you one thing so that you can rest in peace. One of the people Eddie has to meet says to him, 'Each of us was in your life for a reason. You may not have known the reason at the time, and that is what Heaven is for. For understanding your life on earth.'ⁱ

I find that an incredible idea; a helpful way not only about how to look at heaven, but also how to look more closely at what we do with our time on earth. Not only to look at what we do, but to listen to what is going on around us. One of the characters in the book says, "People think of heaven as a paradise garden, a place where they can float on clouds and laze in rivers and mountains. But scenery without solace is meaningless. This is the greatest gifts that God can give you: To understand what happened in your life. To have it explained. It is the peace you have been searching for."ⁱⁱ

Another character says: "...there are no random acts...we are all connected...you can no more separate one life from another than you can separate the breeze from the wind...the human spirit knows, deep down, that all lives intersect..."ⁱⁱⁱ Even if we do not know the names of the people who brush against our lives, "Strangers...are just family you have yet to come to know."^{iv} Another character tells the hero of the book, "That's what heaven is. You get to make sense of your yesterdays."^v Finally, having met his five people in heaven, Eddie returns to the place where he in turn will, '...share his part of the secret of heaven: That each affects the other and the other affects the next, and the world is full of stories, but the stories are all one.'^{vi}

Whether it is this incredible book, or that incredible Christmas favourite film, 'It's a Wonderful Life', where the main character learns what the world would have been had he never lived, this idea of how heaven and earth weave together is important.

Jesus, in John's Gospel, in the upper room, speaks to His closest friends at the Last Supper, around the Lord's Table. They've shared the bread and wine of what we call communion. Jesus teaches them about how they should live without His physical presence in their midst. He talks about heaven as being like His Father's house. There is no mention of pearly gates, or the kind of wallpaper God has chosen, or choirs of angels strumming harps, or what the temperature is like. It is simply, 'In My Father's house there are many rooms.' God is there, and, according to the martyr deacon Stephen in the Book of Acts, Jesus is there too. And that's it. Perhaps it's all we need to know about heaven: that there is plenty of room, and that God is there with Jesus, waiting to welcome us.

I read this passage a lot at funerals, for good reason. There are so many people with troubled hearts, troubled by the fact that the gift of mortal life does not last. What is the answer to that trouble? Many could be suggested by the world, but Jesus only has one, 'Believe in God, believe also in Me.' In heaven, in earth, in life, in death, in the life beyond death, 'God is what you hang your heart upon.'^{vii} If our hearts are not hanging on God, not hanging on Jesus, then they will be troubled.

Jesus talks about life after death, in this many-roomed house. There is a roominess to God and God's relationship with us, not just in the space, but in the time God has for us on earth and in heaven. God's roominess is God's eternity. When Mitch Albom's character Eddie meets his five people in heaven, they all take him to places where they had been happy. Eddie goes from room to room, from episode to episode, from person to person, learning about what his life had been, and the difference that those times, places and people had made to him, and the difference in the end that his life made to other people. Heaven may be the place where the questions are answered. Heaven may be the place where what has felt like our incompleteness is made complete; our emptiness is filled; our randomness is placed in order.

It has certainly made me think about the people who have been, in my life, and the people who are in my life now. What have they been, what are they, to me? What have I learned from them, positively and negatively? What have their actions, their words, their decisions been and how has that shaped me? Who have been the people who have tried to show me what happiness truly is; how to appreciate beauty and kindness; how to recognise my faults and my prejudices and try to deal with them; how to acknowledge my failures, and my successes? Who are the people whose words, actions, reactions continue to shape me, whether I appreciate them or not?

On Friday we commemorated VE Day, and remembered those who fought and lived and fought and died. We see, from history, how the sacrifice of the living and the dead shaped our nation, and our world. One of the characters Eddie meets in heaven is his captain with whom he fought alongside in the Philippines in World War 2. The captain says of those who survive and those who do not in times of war, "Sometimes when you sacrifice something precious, you're not really losing it. You're just passing it on."^{viii} How grateful we must be for those who sacrificed and passed on freedom to us. In recent days whose lives have not been touched by Colonel Tom, also a war veteran, who at 100 has raised over £32M. There too, we find ourselves connected, part of the great tapestry of life where we may be separate threads, but are woven together.

When we think of heaven, we need to think of it being woven together with earth; not its separation but its connection. When we think of ourselves, in these days of isolation, we are still,

paradoxically, still woven together with our society. People may try to break the links and force the illusion of self-sufficiency upon us, but the truth has become apparent in these days: we are more connected than we realise. The connection, now as never before, brings with it responsibilities. Responsibilities to the well-being of our planet, and the people who live upon it. Responsibilities towards our neighbours, our friends, our families. Responsibilities that are a fundamental part of our Christian faith that recognises that though we are many, yet we are one. Has it taken this terrible virus to remind us of what should have been self-evident all along? What lessons are we supposed to be learning now in this broken possibility of life, lessons we are meant to implement in the new normal whenever that phases back into our lives? Through what for some has been the Hell of COVID 19, what are we learning about the earth and its people today, that we are called to shape into the creation of the new heaven after these days are over? Heaven can be glimpsed now, and its lessons of love of neighbour, love of self, love of God, speak out. What are we learning on earth today, that will shape the heaven of tomorrow? We pray so often, 'Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven.' Let's not wait till we're dead to start trying to make sense of what our life was about. Even if only in part, let's start putting it into practice now. Let's bring our little part of heaven to bear on the little part of earth that has been given to us today.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Mark Oakley, *By Way of the Heart*, p137

ⁱⁱ Mitch Albom, *The Five People You Meet In Heaven*, p37

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid* p50

^{iv} *ibid* p51

^v *ibid* p96

^{vi} *ibid* p20

^{vii} Cynthia A Jarvis, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 2*, p467

^{viii} Albom, p98