

Heaven

Psalm 24; Revelation 21:1-6a

In what some historians call the Dark Ages, the time between the collapse of the Roman Empire in Britain, and the early days of the Norman Conquest, the monk Bede was writing his Ecclesiastical History of the English People in the 7th AD.

The country was being ravaged by Vikings. Religion was a volatile mixture of pagan worship and the still new Christian faith which had yet to be accepted by all. In a world where death came early, through battle and violence, through disease and starvation, people searched for ways to make some sense of hope and despair, life and death, heaven and hell. Life was nasty, brutish and short. What could possibly lie beyond it.

A nameless wise counsellor addresses his King, Edwin of Northumbria, speaks about life and death and the promises faith makes:

"O King, the present life of men on earth seems to me, in comparison to the time which is unknown to us, as if you are sitting at dinner with your men...with a good fire kindled on the hearth in the midst of the hall, and all inside well warmed, while outside storms of winter rain and snow are raging. A sparrow comes swiftly flying through the hall; it enters at one door, and soon goes out through the other. During the time it is inside, the storms of winter cannot touch it; but after the briefest moment of calm weather, it vanishes from your sight, quickly returning from winter into winter. In the same way, this life of men appears for a brief moment; what went before, or what will come after, we do not know at all. If, therefore, this new teaching (of Christianity) offers something more certain, it seems worthy to be followed."

Winter is shown as the vast unknowable beyond lying outside human perception. All we know is life within the hall, and our experience of it is as transitory as the flight of the sparrow – one moment of light, preceded and followed by utter darkness. The appeal of Christianity...is that it offers a glimpse into that mysterious darkness, some knowledge of 'the time which is unknown to us.' It allows us to look outside the brief moment that is our life on earth, into eternity. Without that, we, like the sparrow, travel, 'from winter into winter.'ⁱⁱ

The Revelation of John grapples with the idea of what lies beyond life. It is not a definitive answer. It is a poet-prophet imagining what life beyond death might look like. The new heaven and new earth, a holy city blessed by the light and the presence of the living God. For those who weep tears will be wiped away; there will be no more mourning and crying and pain. The old broken order of things will be removed, and everything will be renewed. Heaven and earth will mingle. The familiar and the unfamiliar, the reality and the dream, will be melded together. We will see heaven and earth as one unity. We will see loved ones and strangers transformed into their best selves. We will catch a glimpse of ourselves, familiar and unfamiliar, transformed into what we hoped we would be.

People grapple still getting their minds around life and death and what may lie beyond. Not as some pious dream of an unrealisable future, but rather an inspiration to aspire towards, work towards making our world, and ourselves, the heaven it could be, now. The inspiration to end poverty and unfairness. The inspiration to make war and violence cease. The inspiration to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. The inspiration to end ignorance and fear. The inspiration to care for the vulnerable. The inspiration to make our earth a heaven and not a hell.

Revelation is one of the most unsettling books in the Bible. To many the book is too difficult with its strange imagery, coded language and complex metaphors. Is it to be taken literally? Most

would say not. Do some of its images say something to us? I think yes. John of Patmos, the attributed author, exiled during a time of severe persecution at the end of C1st AD, wrote this letter of comfort to seven churches undergoing persecution, urging them that despite all appearances to the contrary, there was still hope, there would always be comfort, because there was still God.

How many need to experience that comfort today? Stricken families in Gaza, and in Kherson, Ukraine. Bereft families flooded in the Valencia province of Spain? People in Israel, Iran and Lebanon in fear of a bigger war breaking out around them? Perhaps it is they who, whatever their faith or lack of it, need to be reassured that people are working towards a heaven on earth, a bringing of help and aid and shelter and protection and peace. That still there are saints at work today in our world, striving to make good things happen.

How many need to experience that comfort today? Families who have lost loved ones to car accidents. Families losing loved ones to heart disease, or cancer, or dementia. Families who struggle to put enough food on the table each day, or whose sacrifices cut deeper and deeper into their quality of life. Perhaps it is they who, whatever their faith or lack of it, need to be reassured that people are working towards a heaven on earth, working in laboratories and medical facilities looking for cures to disease. Looking to boost the incomes of those most financially vulnerable so they will be able to eat, and also heat their homes this winter. That still there are saints at work today in our world, striving to make good things happen.

There are only a few images of heaven in the Bible, and I don't believe any need be taken overly literally. How do you paint what hope looks like? But I do believe we take their sparkling, airy images and apply their beauty to our earthly aspirations for the world today, not tomorrow, but today to be a better, safer, more welcoming and inclusive place. A place where saints aren't

confined to stained glass windows, but working their love on earth to turn it into little heavens through kindness and generosity and laughter and love.

When I think of heaven, I think of its population. Like the story of a little girl in Church one Sunday, looking at the sun shining through a stained window. "Look, saints are the ones through whom the light comes upon us." she said. There are saints in our church, past and present, through whom the light is shown. Have you, do you, know them?

Saints embrace things that are sometimes 'other' because they are kind and generous towards all others and who respect people who are not like us. Others of different race and age, politics and class and culture and gender and sexual orientation. Many of us fear the 'other', but saints know that the 'other' may be where God meets us.

Saints are those who do not run and hide when death comes close. They are realistic about suffering and loss, but they stay present in love and mercy where there is dying and illness and violence.

Heaven is full of saints like that. Some of whom we have known in our families and in our Church. Earth is full of saints like that, some of whom are sitting beside you today. People, past and present, whose lives count, and who give us glimpses of heaven not simply in the future, but in the here and now.ⁱⁱⁱ For anyone hurting today, hear this story of a real heaven, and of real saints now. They give us glimpses of heaven here on earth. Might we do the things they do to help others see heaven on earth because we make our lives count, in kindness and grace, in love and laughter? Old saints remembered in love, new saints emerging, faithful their whole lives through.^{iv} Mark Oakley, Dean of Southwark, points us towards a modern-day saint who showed that heaven had a place even in apartheid South Africa. Desmond Tutu, a man of unshakeable faith, who put it into practice. A man of tremendous courage, taking on the government and other authorities

of his day and challenging them with Bible truths about dignity and fairness and inclusion. A man whose vision of heaven on earth was shaped by St Augustine who said that, 'Hope has two beautiful daughters: *anger*, at the way things are, and *courage*, to put them right.'

Finally, there was the laughter of Desmond Tutu. Once he started, he never stopped laughing. He told a joke about Mary and Joseph getting to the stable. Joseph bangs on the door of the inn and asks, 'Please, please let us in, my wife is pregnant.' 'That's not my fault,' said the inn keeper. 'And it's not mine either,' said Joseph. And Tutu started giggling, and then shrieking and belly-laughing with tears down his cheeks.

What will heaven be like? Full of saints with faith, and with courage. And please God, let there be endless laughter, which is the sound of mercy, and hope, and love.

What should earth be like? Full of saints with faith, and with courage. And please God, let there be endless laughter, which is the sound of mercy, and hope, and love.

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

Amen

ⁱ Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, pps183-185

ⁱⁱ Eleanor Parker, *Winters in the World*, p39

ⁱⁱⁱ Walter Brueggemann, *Collected Sermons, Vol 1*, p206

^{iv} *Ibid* p210