

Heaven is where we make it

Fifth Sunday of Easter, 10/5/20

Margaret Joachim

Reflection for Morning Prayer. Readings: Acts 7, 55-end and John 14, 1-14.

As so often happens, there is a common theme to this morning's readings. Heaven features strongly in both of them. Stephen looks up at heaven, sees the glory of God and Jesus standing at his right hand, and this vision gives him the courage to undergo martyrdom. This is the classic 'up there' version of heaven. When powered flight, and later, space flight first began there was considerable concern in some quarters that pilots or astronauts would encounter heaven. Most children instinctively think that heaven is up in the sky, as do many grown-ups. My deaf friends know this too – the sign for 'God' is a finger pointing to the sky, and 'heaven' is looking at a sweep of hands above the head.

Each of us probably has our own concept of heaven. Jean-Paul Sartre thought that 'Hell is other people', so heaven for him would either be very sparsely populated or some form of solitary confinement. Dean Inge was happy to have company as long as they were people who had taken firsts at Oxbridge (so that rules me out). Fine dining was important to some – and wouldn't it be heavenly just now to go out for a really good meal? GK Chesterton told us that 'The wine they drink in heaven is made in Haute Lorraine', and Sidney Smith hoped he would be eating caviar to the sound of trumpets. It's just as well that there are many dwelling-places in God's house – room for lots of people and plenty of variety. Sartre and Smith must clearly be kept a long way apart from each other.

This is a different heaven from the one in the story of the old rabbi who died and went to hell. Everything seemed good: there were crowds of people sitting at huge refectory tables with a splendid feast spread out in front of them. But when he looked more closely he realised that they were all utterly miserable. They all had five-foot-long forks and spoons; they couldn't eat, only look longingly at the food. But he was just visiting, and when he went to heaven he found that it looked exactly the same – same tables, same food, same cutlery, but everyone was happy. They were feeding each other across the tables. With a few minor adjustments heaven will be perfectly acceptable in our socially-distanced world.

Eliza Doolittle just wanted 'a room somewhere, far away from the cold night air, with one enormous chair'. There is a very common view that heaven is the place of ultimate and eternal rest and comfort. (I shall need some books as well.) But this concept has often been deliberately and unscrupulously used to condemn the poor to appalling living and working conditions, bad health and inadequate education and no prospect of change: 'no problem, don't complain, you'll have a better life in heaven'. This is the 'pie in the sky when you die' theory. It's not wrong for the poor to believe in a better life. It is utterly wrong for people exploiting them to preach, or encourage preaching of this sort, when they actually have the means and the power to change things now. Christian Aid's approach is much better. A recent campaign theme was 'We believe in life before death'. And, by the way, Christian Aid Week begins today. Heaven is the place of justice, forgiveness, generosity, love and inclusiveness. We each have the responsibility to create these conditions now, feeding each other across the tables of the world – not just going piously to church on Sundays and expecting to be rewarded later on. Christians are people who help to build the Kingdom of Heaven here and now, not just for ourselves but for everyone.

During my lifetime many people – especially politicians and economists – have become increasingly cynical about the way in which the general public can be expected to behave. Constraints can – or can't – or must be put on them to achieve a desired result. Altruism, commitment to public service and belief in the general good of humanity has declined. In all this, the wealth gap and the education gap between the élite and everyone else has increased, and many of the means by which people could achieve an escape from poverty and gain a better standard of living have been removed.

Two good things have come out of this pandemic. One is the realisation that we have far less control over our existence than we had thought. The other is the extent to which hundreds of thousands of ordinary Britons have shown that they are as willing to be good neighbours as they have ever been. Whether it's a phone call to check on an old lady or a 12-hour shift in an intensive care unit, a fashion house repurposed to make medical scrubs, a centenarian walking round his garden and raising £32 million, or our own local support volunteers – we are building a community, an interconnectedness and a sense of responsibility for each other that hasn't been seen for two generations. We are loving our neighbours as ourselves, and that is a taste of heaven here on earth.