
Knocking on Heaven's Door

Advent Sunday

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 3 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

On the four Sundays in Advent it was once the tradition for the preacher to address the Four Last Things – death, judgement, heaven and hell – or what are known at Duke as the Final Four. It's easy to see why this tradition has been discontinued in a university setting. The problem is that the undergraduates all disappear after the second week with a pretty good understanding of death and judgement but never having heard of heaven. All pain and no gain. So today I'm going to cut to the chase and talk about heaven.

Two obsessions have prevented preachers talking much about heaven over the years. The first obsession, which you'll recognize, is what revivalist preaching is largely about. It's the harrowing anxiety about who gets into heaven and who gets sent to hell, and the determination to do whatever it takes to make sure one's in the group going upstairs rather than downstairs. The more significant question of what heaven is like for those who get there never seems to come up in these discussions.

The second obsession is a much more contemporary one. It's about offering words of comfort to the bereaved. Setting aside the conventional language of heaven and hell leaves us as a culture with a desperate search for platitudes in the face of the agony of losing a friend or relative. Pastors avoid facing hard theological and philosophical questions in the mistaken notion that their principal role is to offer comfort, however superficial and clichéd that comfort may be. But the truth is you can't enjoy the glory of heaven without first facing the reality of death.

What I'd like to do is to describe three things heaven is not before going on to describe three things heaven is. In between I'd like to suggest a way we might distinguish between the truth of heaven and what we might regard as second-rate imitations. I understand that sometimes grief is so profound that we can cast off from our theological moorings in search of comfort. But my aim today is to show that what the Bible promises us about heaven is so much greater than what is on offer from Hallmark greetings cards.

So, here goes with three things heaven is not. Heaven is not the continuation of a person's eternal soul. Countless people over the centuries have taken comfort in the belief that, while their loved one's body lies a-mouldering in the grave, his or her soul goes marching on. I'm sorry to tell you, but this isn't a belief rooted in Christian theology. The dualist idea that we are essentially physical bodies and spiritual souls, which become detached at death whereupon we continue simply as spiritual souls – this idea is one that arises among the Greek philosophers centuries before Christ. It's not something the Old Testament comprehends. For the Bible, humans are one in life, body and soul, and one in death, body and soul. Death is real. When Canon Henry Scott Holland said in St Paul's Cathedral on Whitsunday 1910 the words "Death is nothing at all. I have only slipped away into the next room... Life... is the same as it ever was. There is absolutely unbroken continuity" he was certainly offering words of comfort but he wasn't preaching orthodox Christian theology. Can anyone look at Jesus on the cross and say "death is nothing at all"? Can anyone look at the aftermath of a suicide bombing in a market square and imagine the words "I have only slipped away into the next room"? Our death is the end of us. Our hope lies not in pretending otherwise, but in knowing that our death is not the end of God.

Here's the second thing heaven is not. Heaven is not our reabsorption into the infinite. This idea that when we die we blend back into the ground of being is a mixture of the simply biological assumption that we dissolve into the soil and the quaintly spiritual notion that we become part of the ether. Just as the champion of the eternal soul argument is Henry Scott Holland, so the great exemplar of the reabsorption argument is Mary Frye. I'm sure you'll know the lines, "I am a thousand winds that blow, I am the diamond glints on snow, I am the sun on ripened grain, I am the gentle autumn rain." Again, these are comforting words, but they seem to have come out of a world view that has stopped caring whether a belief is true so long as it's comforting. Note that, like the Scott Holland piece, God is wholly absent from this understanding of heaven. Jesus seems to have achieved nothing of any significance in his cross and resurrection, at least as far as our death and life thereafter is concerned. Perhaps the reason that the verses usually entitled "Death is nothing at all" and "Do not stand by my grave and weep" have become so enormously popular in our contemporary culture is that they offer pictures

of continuity beyond death that require no belief in God or reference to Jesus whatsoever. The trouble is, they do so by denying the reality of death, and the pictures they offer, of heaven as a waiting room or as a disembodied wind, are so bleak as to offer little or no real hope at all.

The third thing heaven is not is simply the reconstitution of our fleshly bodies. This is less of a mistake than the first two, and it may sound obvious in an age where cremation of dead bodies is relatively commonplace, but it's still worth stating. The funeral sermon that says "I'm sure Peggy's up there now watering and pruning her roses just as she did down here" seems to be assuming that heaven is basically a continuation of our present physical life in all its prosaic mundanity. To be sure, heaven is a physical existence, but the bodies of the saints are not simply embalmed versions of the ones we have here. The idea of the Rapture is one that likewise overstates the physical continuity of heaven. It's said in some circles that the Rapture is a good thing because it would whisk away all the fundamentalists and leave everyone else to get on with things, but that still distracts from the fact that the Rapture offers an impoverished picture of heaven.

So these are three things heaven is not. What's wrong with them is that they make no reference to the scriptural notion of heaven, have no place for God, and specifically have no relationship to anything brought about by Jesus. I wish I could say they were harmless but I can't, because in fact they distract attention away from the Bible, away from God, and specifically away from the God we meet in Jesus.

The Bible doesn't speak much about heaven as the eternal dwelling place of Christians. Instead it speaks of heaven as the place where God dwells. And this points to the crucial difference between a Christian notion of life after death and the ones I've been describing. For Christians, there is only one thing greater than the overwhelming horror of death: and that's the overwhelming glory of God. The popular verses I've quoted lose their credibility when they deny the overwhelming horror of death, and they lose any sense of wonder when they ignore the overwhelming glory of God. The Christian hope is that after death we come face to face with the wondrous power and love and passion of God, an experience we could liken to a tidal wave or a raging fire or a dazzling light: and yet because of Jesus that overwhelming glory doesn't destroy us, sinners that we are, but transforms us into the creatures God always destined us to be. After death we face neither the oblivion of physical disintegration nor the obliteration of spiritual destruction but the transformation of glorious resurrection.

As we turn now to the three things heaven is, we realize that we find those things not by massaging our own bodies or souls for continuity, but by looking to what we are shown of the character of God, and discovering that God's purpose is to model our transformed character on his.

So the first thing heaven is about is worship. It's no coincidence that one scriptural picture of heaven is of a choir, because a choir are a wonderful picture of what it means to have a body of your own but find your true voice in a much greater body, a body where your voice sings most truly in harmony with the voices of others, where you find your voice most fully in words of praise and thanksgiving, where you are lost in concentration and where every detail matters, where you rejoice at the gifts of others which only enhance the gifts that are your own, where fundamentally you are all turned to face the source of your gifts and the focus of your praise. The reason we put so much care and attention into the way we worship at Duke Chapel is because we believe the way we worship is the most significant way we depict and anticipate the life of heaven. Every Sunday Christians gather together and depict and anticipate the life of heaven. That's why worship matters so much – because in eternity, that's all there'll be. And worship isn't just some abstract ideal. Everything depends on who we worship. And the book of Revelation makes it absolutely clear who we worship – we worship the Lamb who was slain, the Lamb on the throne, Jesus, the one who gave his life because God loved us too much to leave us to oblivion and obliteration, the one whose resurrection gave us the life of heaven for which we long and on which our hope depends. What we strive for in worship is that every ounce of our energy and concentration is focused on the God we find in Jesus Christ so that we are truly lost in wonder, love and praise – because that's what heaven is like.

And here's the second thing heaven is about. Heaven is about friendship. Jesus said at the Last Supper, "no longer do I call you servants – I call you friends". The heart of God is three persons in perfect communion. And yet at the table there is a fourth place – a place left for us to join the communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is heaven – the experience of being invited to the table of friendship to join the Father, Son and Holy

Spirit. At last we discover, not just what God can do when left to do it on his own, but what is possible when in perfect communion humanity and all creation join the everlasting dance of the Trinity.

If friendship is what heaven is about, that means not just friendship between God and us but friendship between us and one another. And this is what the book of Revelation points us to when it talks at the very end of the coming of a new heaven and a new earth. At the very end of the Bible we have this picture of Jerusalem the new city, coming down from heaven. In other words cities are not essentially transitory, dirty, soiled things that are transcended by the coming of heaven. There will always be a city. Learning to live together as friends is at the heart of preparing for heaven, just as worship is. The reason we at Duke Chapel are working as hard at our relationship with our university and our city as we are at our worship is because we believe making friendships across social barriers is what we shall spend eternity doing, and what we are called to do now is to anticipate heaven.

And the third and final thing heaven is about is eating together. This is maybe the most common picture of all in the New Testament – heaven as a great feast, a banquet celebrating the marriage of heaven and earth, the perfect union or communion of God and all God's children. Just imagine a fabulous meal where there were no allergies, no eating disorders, no inequalities in world trade, no fatty foods, no gluttony, and no price tag. The reason why the Eucharist is at the center of the life of Duke Chapel is because the Eucharist is where food, friendship and worship all come together. We are made friends with God and one another when we eat together in worship. In eating together we recall the transforming meals Christ shared before, during and after his passion, and we anticipate the great banquet we shall share with him. The Eucharist depicts what creation was for and what it cost. And when we gather together as two or three or twenty or two thousand and make new friends by eating together we are celebrating a little Eucharist, a little icon of the Trinity at table together, a little glimpse of heaven.

This is what heaven is. Worship, friendship and eating together. Don't settle for anything less. Don't pass into the next room or become a thousand winds that blow. Don't leave the central claims and shape of the Christian hope behind you in the face of death, just when it really matters. Enter the life that God has prepared for you, the life that Jesus laid down his own life to open up for you. Remember that Advent is about anticipating heaven, and spend your Advent getting your worship right, your friendship right, and your eating right.

There's things I haven't talked about. I haven't talked about whether heaven comes to us on the day we die or whether we await our resurrection on the last day. I haven't talked about near death experiences and whether they tell us anything about life after death. I haven't talked about how we preserve our individual identity and personality when we've been so thoroughly transformed. I haven't talked about whether the end of the world is coming soon or is millions of years away. I haven't talked about them because I don't think, finally, they matter all that much. Like the popular verses, they're all about us, whereas what we'll discover is that heaven is all about God. There's a great sense of mystery about heaven, but I think the scriptures tell us all we really need to know. They tell us what matters. What matters is being overwhelmed by the power and love and glory of God, now and for ever. Heaven isn't a half-hearted reward for those who have lived a life of grudging misery, and it isn't an automatic entry into a revolving door of thudding dullness. Heaven is being overwhelmed by the horror of death and then finding not oblivion or obliteration but a further overwhelming. This second overwhelming is an overwhelming by the glory of God. It's a transformation into the life that the Father gave us, Jesus lived, and the Spirit infuses in wondrous worship, loving friendship, and a feast of praise. That's what matters. In the end, that's all that matters.