

Having suffered Death, Judgement and hell, we come at last to Heaven. I want to treat this differently from the other topics in our Advent theme. I'm not going to do as joined up sermon, so to speak, but read some of the great evocations of Heaven which we find in The Bible and in literature. So this will not be so much a sermon as food for meditation: to conjure, if you like, the heavenly mood music. We are fortunate, blessed, indeed to have *The Psalms* translated in *The Book of Common Prayer* by Miles Coverdale. My friend Michael Hyam, now departed this life, read *The Psalms* in the original Hebrew but he always maintained that Coverdale's translation improved on the original. Here is part of *Psalm 84*:

O how amiable are thy dwellings : thou Lord of hosts!

My soul hath a desire and longing to enter into the courts of the Lord : my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God.

Yea, the sparrow hath found her an house, and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young : even thy altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God.

Blessed are they that dwell in thy house : they will be always praising thee.

Blessed is the man whose strength is in thee : in whose heart are thy ways.....

....For one day in thy courts : is better than a thousand.

I had rather be a door-keeper in the house of my God : than to dwell in the tents of ungodliness.

For the Lord God is a light and defence : the Lord will give grace and worship, and no good thing shall he withhold from them that live a godly life.

O Lord God of hosts : blessed is the man that putteth his trust in thee.

Coverdale's tomb is less than a mile from here, in the church of St Magnus Martyr, Lower Thames Street. We should have *The Psalms* always beside us. They contain some wonderfully tender lines like this in which we ask God to:

Keep me as the apple of an eye : hide me under the shadow of thy wings.

And: *Like as the hart desireth the water-brooks: so longeth my soul after thee O God.*

Or the Psalmist's astonishingly intimate prayer to God: *Put my tears into thy bottle.*

I quoted that verse once in a sermon at Wormwood Scrubs and one of the inmates said feelingly afterwards that he drew great comfort from it for he knew how the Psalmist felt when he wrote it.

Heaven is the abode of perfect love, the love which does indeed make the world go round – according to Dante. At the end of *Paradiso* he approaches the Throne of God and says:

At this point high imagination failed;

But already my desire and my will

Were being turned like a wheel all at one speed

By the love which moves the sun and the other stars

Heaven is not something that starts after we have died. Heaven begins here. We have foretastes of Heaven in the relationship of love. Recall then those loving words from *The Book of Ruth* when, out in the fields, Ruth says to Naomi:

Intreat me not to leave thee or to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; and whither thou diest, I will die: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God.

The repetitions there make the language rhythmically restful. There is a great sense of quietness. Of something complete and forever. Love. Faithfulness. When we think of rhythm, we think immediately of music, and both rhythm and music together in the musical rhythms of John Donne when he tells us of Heaven:

*Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening
into the house and gate of heaven,
to enter into that gate and dwell in that house,
where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light;
no noise nor silence, but one equal music;
no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession;
no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity;
in the habitations of thy glory and dominion,
world without end.*

In our first paradise, God puts the man and the woman in a garden where they eat the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. At the end of the Bible, which is to say at the end of time, God restores to us another garden. And this garden has at its centre the Tree of Life, which is of course the Cross of Christ.

And he shewed me a pure river of the water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the Tree of Life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

And the scene of the garden together with children – *Ye must become as a little child* – is the heavenly vision as described by Eliot at the end of *Little Gidding*: Eliot's own prophecy at the ecstatic conclusion of *Four Quartets*:

*With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;
At the source of the longest river
The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple tree
Not known, because not looked for*

*But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea,
Quick, now, here, now, always –
A condition of complete sincerity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flame are infolded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.*

Such a marvellous evocation of our final destiny. The reason we find these readings so moving, so strangely comforting, is that they connect with something very much under our skin: something we know intuitively to be true. We know in our hearts. *And the heart has its reasons which reason knows not of.* But we have this understanding on the highest authority. And so I end with the words of Our Lord to his disciples:

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know. Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way? Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: No man cometh unto the Father but by me.