

And after death, Judgment and Hell, at last we come to heaven. Well, I hope so. I wonder what it will be like? Human beings have an acutely ambiguous attitude towards life after death. There is the story of the famous Spiritualist F.W.H. Myers talking with a woman whose daughter had only recently died. Myers asked, *What do you suppose has become of her?* The woman replied, *Oh I'm sure she's enjoying everlasting bliss – but I wish you wouldn't talk about such unpleasant things!*

Heaven won't be like going to church all the time. Remember the lovely hymn we often sing where it says: *So, Lord, at length when Sacraments shall cease.* Yes, even the Sacraments will come to an end. As you know from your Catechism, *A Sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.* So when we are in that eternal state of spiritual grace, we shall not require the outward and visible sign.

When we speak of heaven, we are trying to speak about a spiritual state of being beyond time and space, and so all our language will have to be metaphorical. We cannot express supernatural realities directly in natural language. The Bible itself is limited to extravagant metaphors. We get fantastic – even lurid – pictures of beasts with hundreds of eyes, angels and archangels, the Tree of Life and a stream flowing from the throne of God. The Bible is written in natural language, so not even the Bible can tell us directly what heaven is like.

I think we have another way of knowing. Think of this: if heaven is beyond time and space, if it is infinite, then there is a sense – though our language here is close to breaking down – in which we are there already. Or, if I may so put it, a sense in which *we have been there.* For if heaven is an eternal state, then to be there is to be there eternally.

We have intuitions of this truth. What Wordsworth called *intimations of immortality*:

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting: The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star, Hath had elsewhere its setting, And cometh from afar: Not in entire forgetfulness, And not in utter nakedness, But trailing clouds of glory do we come From God, who is our home*

*Trailing clouds of glory.* Because God made this material world and because he was incarnate in it in his Son, we must expect the material world to contain reminiscences of the eternal world, heaven, God's everlasting abode. This universe of ours is material, but it is not merely material. As Gerard Manley Hopkins put it:

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.... Because the Holy Ghost over the bent World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

Remember Our Lord promised that the Holy Ghost would *bring all things to your remembrance.*

But this experience is not just for poets. I ask you to reflect on the fact that you and I, each one of us, knows it in ourselves. Imagine you are on a weekend in the country. You awake in the milky

dawn light in a silent room. It is a high room with oak beams. You go downstairs and open the door. You feel the rush of the fragrant air and from as far as you can see into the mist and the dampness, there comes the calling of birdsong. The watery colours of the landscape can hardly be made out. The pale disc of the sun behind the racing clouds. This produces in you an exquisite sensation, which is something like joy, something like peace: but you can't put it into words *exactly*. For coming at you out of the beauty of the scene, there is something like recollection, that reminiscence I mentioned earlier. Like a haunting. I believe such experiences are sent for our encouragement. Intimations of immortality. Natural presences which both hide and reveal the eternal presence of God.

Or remember the first time you stood on the shore as a child and watched the tide roll in.

When I was a boy I spent quite a lot of time in hospital. I remember once – I was about seven – I'd been in for several weeks, cooped up, as they say, on the ward. One day it was brilliantly sunny and warm and my favourite nurse – actually, Staff Nurse Parker – got permission to take me out for a walk. Round the back of the great Victorian buildings of St James' Hospital there was a large garden. I remember the warm sunlight. I remember the deep red roses. I remember the crackle of our feet on the gravel path. I remember that neither of us said a word.

A couple of years before that, just after my Auntie Doris had gone off to New Zealand to marry her soldier boy, I went one afternoon, just after lunch, upstairs into the front bedroom. It was very quiet. Doris had left her dressing gown behind the door. But what I noticed was the sunlight on the dark brown dressing table. I had a warm, reassuring sense of presence again. And I didn't want to leave the bedroom. As Hopkins said, it was the sense of *deep down things*. A reality beyond appearances.

God leaves his footprints and fingerprints all over the place. Why do we *know* that music is not just melody, rhythm and harmony – but there's something hanging around in there that excites us, that thrills us or even makes us cry? The Bach *Double Violin Concerto*. The slow movement of Schubert's *String Quintet in C* – where Schubert almost stops the music altogether. The utterly sublime music Purcell produced for the funeral of Queen Mary. And the words from the Prayer Book that go with it: *Thou knowest Lord, the secrets of our hearts: shut not thy merciful ears to our prayer.*

We find these intimations of the eternal world everywhere. In just a line of sublime poetry such as: *sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not. Or: The voice of the hidden waterfall and the children in the apple tree.*

Or think of that feeling when you love someone. The nicest thing I ever heard my dad say to my mother: *If I loved you any more, I'd burst.*

The presence of God is subtle. The reality of eternity. It is forever half hidden and half revealed. Memorably to the married couple on their way to Emmaus on the first Easter Day: *But their eyes were holden that they should not know him. Until later: He took bread and blessed it and brake and gave to them...and he was known of them in breaking of bread.*

In all these ways, God seeks to comfort us with the reality of heaven, half hidden, half revealed in the things of this earth. As usual, St Augustine puts it better than anyone:

*But, what do I love, when I love Thee? Not the prettiness of a body, not the graceful rhythm, not the brightness of light (that friend of these eyes), not the sweet melodies of songs in every style, not the fragrance of flowers and ointments and spices, not manna and honey, not limbs which can be grasped in fleshly embraces - these I do not love, when I love my God. Yet I do love something like a light, a voice, a fragrance, food, embrace of my inner man, wherein for my soul a light shines, and place does not encompass it, where there is a sound which time does not sweep away, where there is a fragrance which the breeze does not disperse, where there is a flavour which eating does not diminish, and where there is a clinging which satiety does not disentwine. This is what I love, when I love my God.*