

Sermon: Heaven

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying; neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away

The fourth and last of The Four Last Things is Heaven. Arguably, heaven causes more difficulties than the other three put together: death, judgement, and hell. Now to start with, you have to be sure you really want to go to heaven. People who have not much cared for God in this life – why should they want to be closer to him in the next? And another problem is the company we might find there. I'm not sure I'd like to meet Calvin and John Knox, or George Bernard Shaw. There was a sharp comment by John Osborne on George Bernard Shaw. He said: *He writes like a Pakistani who learnt English aged twelve in order to become a chartered accountant.*

Imagine your first day in heaven. You come down to breakfast for the first of an infinite series of soft-boiled eggs and toast soldiers and you find yourself sitting between Richard Dawkins and Bob Geldof. Tony Benn might be there, making sure the angels observe equal opportunities. And Edward Heath, trying to negotiate heaven's entry into the EU. Dorothy Parker warned us to be discerning:

*Whose love is given over-well
Shall look on Helen's face in hell;
While they whose love is thin and wise
Shall see John Knox in Paradise*

Certainly in heaven there will be God and the music of Bach. Even this will cause trouble, because a lot of people will prefer Elton John to Bach. If heaven means we all get rewarded with the things we love best, it looks as if heaven and hell will have to be the same place: for one man's meat is another man's poison. I Hope it isn't going to be heavily spiritual. There will still be the Test Matches, please. And some decent claret. I should like also to be near my wife. But this might be a problem on account of that verse which says: *In the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage.* Perhaps it's all right if you're married already?

There are so many difficulties here. In fact, it's just about impossible to form a picture of heaven, because we are bound to think in terms of space and time. Heaven is not in time and it isn't a place. It is beyond time and space: eternal. When we think of our lives, our being, we

have to think of being somewhere and at a particular time. But truly when we die and leave this world, we leave space and time too. So being, life, existence in heaven must be very different from what they are down here. So do we have to give up thinking about heaven altogether – or is there another way?

I believe there is another way. When people try to express something intangible, they often turn to the visual image and to music. Sometimes the results are amusing. For instance, some 19th century evangelicals in their tin tabernacle put religious lines to popular tunes of the day. And usually the words did not quite fit the tunes. So one song about heaven began:

*I want a man
I want a man
I want a mansion in the sky*

The second verse went:

*Come down sal
Come down sal
Come down salvation*

And the final verse was:

*O take thy mourning pil
O take thy mourning pil
O take thy mourning pilgrims home.*

Human beings have a need to express what is beyond them. We are possessed of a deep sense of the mysterious. This is why we developed all the arts including poetry and music. So look at one of the most famous and earliest experiences of the divine mystery; Isaiah's vision of God in the temple when he saw the Lord high and lifted up. Isaiah's response is to utter a few words in a certain rhythm:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory.

And out of this little utterance the Church developed the most ecstatic prayer in the Mass:

Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth: pleni sunt coeli, et terra Gloria tua

Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of Hosts: heaven and earth are full of thy glory.

And these few words in a certain rhythm have captivated the great composers for centuries. So we have the great arching Sanctus in Gregorian chant. The six part chorus in Bach's B-minor Mass: largo then vivace in the dazzling key of D-major. Mozart's C-minor Mass with antiphonal choirs hurling ecstasy into the vault. Or something serene from Schubert. Or terrifying from Langlais. Miraculously in such works we find that what we thought inexpressible is expressed. And we understand through being overwhelmed – exactly as Isaiah was overwhelmed in his original vision. You remember his response:

Woe is me, for I am undone

Now there is a composer who has had three goes at representing heaven. Gustav Mahler tried first in his Second Symphony, *The Resurrection*. In the last movement the great chorus of the resurrected sing:

Aufersteh'n, ja aufersteh'n
Wirst du, Mein Staub,
Nach kurzer Ruh'!
Unsterblich Leben! Unsterblich Leben

Rise again, yes, rise again,
Will you My dust,
After a brief rest!
Immortal life! Immortal life

And Mahler adds to our sense of heaven's exalted heights by scoring cow bells, above which the chorus soars into heaven.

Now, just to show that there's more than one way to skin a rabbit, Mahler gives us in his Fourth Symphony a quite different vision of heaven. This is not the solemn chorale of the resurrected, but a jokey little song in which the saints are all given their petty tasks

*Should a fast day come along,
all the fishes at once come swimming with joy.
There goes Saint Peter running
with his net and his bait
to the heavenly pond.
Saint Martha must be the cook.*

*There is just no music on earth
that can compare to ours.
Even the eleven thousand virgins
venture to dance,
and Saint Ursula herself has to laugh.
There is just no music on earth
that can compare to ours.
Cecilia and all her relations
make excellent court musicians.
The angelic voices
gladden our senses,
so that all awaken for joy.*

And then in his Eighth Symphony – the so called *Symphony of a Thousand* – Mahler plunges deeply into Goethe's romantics of atonement. The redeemed Faust is carried into heaven as the Mystical Chorus sings:

Alles Vergangliche ist nur ein Gleichnis...

All things transitory are but as symbols sent...the inexpressible here finds expression

We can return from our excursion into German Romanticism to that most musical of the English poets, John Donne. And here we find Donne leading us into heaven. He says;

*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.*