

‘... as it is in heaven’

Reverend John Marcon July, 2013

A] Few concepts have loomed as large in the beliefs of religious believers and non-believers alike as the beliefs about ‘heaven’ and probably few have been believed in such diverse ways and exploited, misused and dogmatically asserted with absolute finality by some people and extreme uncertainty by others. Beliefs in reincarnation dominate the religious thinking of millions of people in Asia and increasingly in the Western world. Others perceive heaven as quite similar to earth or that there are several heavens on differing levels. Yet more hold that heaven is full and our future lies in a new earth.

Within the Christian tradition there is also a diversity of belief ranging from heaven as a very physical place to one that’s a more ethereal spiritual idea through to a belief that heaven as a state or place beyond this earthly life does not exist at all.

B] Probably the most common belief and the most widespread is that heaven is a real and definite place and state to which those who trust in God are given a heritage through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus as God incarnate – God in human form.

Before I suggest a model of any kind it is intriguing to look at the biblical accounts.

The Pentateuch – the first five books from Genesis to Deuteronomy, known to the Jewish people as The Torah, contain no information about heaven although some have inferred it from other references, e.g. The Lord appeared to us in the *past* saying, “I have loved you with an everlasting love”. (Jeremiah 31; 3) For this reason the Sadducees of Jesus’ time did not accept the divine inspiration of any books outside the Torah, so denied that heaven existed. In a well-known exchange with Jesus they produced a ‘case study’.

C] A woman’s husband died and in accordance with biblical marriage law his brother took her as his wife; he died and the next brother did the same until all seven had been her husband and died. Not surprisingly, she then died also.

“Whose wife will she be in heaven,” the Sadducees asked, “for they all had her?”

Jesus recognised the trap being set but offered a window on heavenly relationships, declaring that there was no marriage in heaven so the problem did not arise. Marriage is an exclusive trust relationship designed quite deliberately to commit the couple to each other and to protect them from external relational pressure and keep them safe with each other. In heaven total trust prevails among all people and all relationships are free to be inclusive within the love of God as no destructive forces exist.

Jesus also noted that God is of the living not of the dead. The idea that what is described as ‘heaven’ is a state/place beyond our universe was challenged firstly by those Jews who subscribed only to the authenticity of the Torah. They regarded a heaven beyond earth as the result of pagan influences, especially Greek ones that they declared distorted the remaining Hebrew Scriptures. The theological term for the study of these questions is ‘eschatology’, from

the Greek meaning the study of that which is last or final; the state of people beyond death and what may happen thereafter.

‘Realised eschatology’ refers to the doctrines of a continuous process of renewal of the earth and denies the reality of anything beyond death. Christians throughout the centuries and Jewish believers before them have held to both viewpoints, often very forcefully.

DJ I should declare my own theological bias – I believe emphatically in the gift of everlasting life; that it is offered by God to all people yet no-one is forced to receive it.

I believe heaven to be a physical/spiritual reality where my personal identity is real as are those of all others; where the values of God in people are unhindered by destructive forces of any kind and where the opportunities for growth and development are unlimited.

I accept that we know nothing for certain – if we did we would have no need of faith - but because I trust in a perfect Saviour I believe I will know the totality of forgiveness and the gift of eternal life. By its nature a gift cannot be earned or granted on merit. It is the God of grace who bestows that gift upon all who will receive it. I would never be dogmatic about precisely what form eternal life will take - it will be sufficient to trust God to continue offering us all unconditional, complete, free and eternal love for everyone ever born.

E] It is reasonable to expect a logical background for any belief; it should not defy rational thinking or be a contradiction to sound common sense. Salvation does not depend on the perfection of our doctrinal understanding but on the grace of God. We are to continually wrestle with matters theological in order to deepen and develop our insights, listening for God’s message through the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit and the presence of Jesus and so be a more enlightened people. I accept that those Christians who have decided that there is no evidence for an afterlife do hold their beliefs with integrity and I believe God will honour that integrity and not prohibit them from a new revelation upon death.

One common objection to a vision of life eternal beyond this one is how this may be exploited to inform a downtrodden suffering community not to seek to improve their lot because they will be the better rewarded in heaven. Such a belief is a blasphemous distortion of all that is Christian and should further evidence be sought there is a pertinent phrase in the Lord’s Prayer that states the goal of life on earth with crystal clarity.

‘--- your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’

Jesus, in all his references to heaven, distinctly identified it as a reality beyond this life.

Before him Job declares, "I know that my redeemer lives and that he will stand at the latter day upon the earth. And though ... worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh I will see God".

The Doctrine of the Resurrection Predates Christianity. The word *resurrection* comes from the Latin *resurrectus*, which is the past participle of *resurgere*, meaning *to rise again*. Although the doctrine of the resurrection comes to the forefront in the New Testament it predates the Christian era. There is an apparent reference to the resurrection in the book of Job, where Job says, "I know that my redeemer lives, and that he will stand at the latter day upon the earth".

Isaiah says: "Your dead will live. Together with my dead body, they will arise. Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust, for your dew is like the dew of herbs, and the earth will cast out the dead." [Isa. 26:19]

This belief was still common among the Jews in New Testament times, as exemplified by the passage which relates the raising of Lazarus from the dead. When Jesus told Lazarus' sister, Martha, that Lazarus would rise again, she replied, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day". [Jn 11:24] Also, one of the two main branches of the Jewish religious establishment, the Pharisees, believed in and taught the future resurrection of the body. [cf Acts 23:1-8]

There are over one hundred direct references to the gift of eternal life in the Bible – life that is clearly defined as being beyond this life; it is one of the two major themes of Jesus' discourse with those around him – the other one, interestingly, was the danger of material wealth with the consequent suffering of the poor.

F] In medieval times the Church claimed the power of the decision as to which persons were given eternal life and which were not, creating in the populations of Europe and its colonies especially terrifying fears in sermons and in teaching, reinforced and enhanced by lurid, visible portrayals of sinners vividly reflected in stained glass as they are tortured in Hell. This was not a question of belief in heaven but a concept of Hell as the eternal punishment alternative, promising exquisite unrelenting agony forever for the unbelievers. Sadly, residual elements of this blasphemous heresy continue in some places even in our time.

Other religions have their own variations on the same theme. Some, but not all, forms of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism proclaim similar beliefs. Some years ago a young woman in Iraq whose leg had been lost in a roadside bomb explosion was in hospital crying, "God forgive me", over and over, convinced she was being punished for her or her family's sin. Quite recently another young Hindu woman trying to raise her near-starving sisters and a baby brother following her parent's death by crossfire in a gang war declared to those who sought to help her that - "I was a terrible sinner in my previous life and now my family are paying for it". Perhaps you have seen the moving and harrowing film, 'Water', depicting the lives of Indian girls – some as young as 8 or 9 years old - whose fiancés died before their marriages had taken place – often to men or boys they had never met. These women are held responsible for the death of the men and are treated appallingly as total outcasts – all due to a belief that somewhere in previous lives on the way to or from attainment of righteousness they committed some grievous sin.

G] The reality of heaven is basic to orthodox Christian belief. There is recognition that the fulfilment of God's love for us cannot be completed during this life as our knowledge of evil prevents it. We find an innate capacity for destructive attitudes and behaviour that often horrifies us and while we rejoice in the grace of forgiveness we cannot eliminate the underlying nature of sin with all its power to alienate us from God and from each other – even from ourselves. Heaven is, however, much more than relief from sin – it is the joyous wonder of real and total freedom, the like of which we cannot imagine.

We should be very cautious about trying to describe heaven's detail. A worm, being blind and having heard a cat describe the wondrous ever-changing beauty of the sunset, asks again for the

feline perspective; the cat, seeing only in black and white, obliges, extolling the glory of ever-changing patterns and shades of dark and light grey, white light and darkness and the worm is grateful for the enlightenment, but what really have either discovered about the truth of the sunset?

Let's be content to know what the thief on the cross knew – that although all three of them would die that very day he would be alive with Jesus. Don't be diverted by debate on Paradise; the key phrase was Jesus' promise, "Today you will be with *me*".

Let's not get taken with the literal variations of the apocalyptic literature of Daniel and the Revelation. Jewish apocalyptic writing was deeply metaphorical and allegorical by nature and was never intended to be picked over with selected parts taken as simple unadorned fact.

The Funeral Service declares that we as God's people, 'trust in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to everlasting life'. The very reality of life itself empowers us to believe that life is stronger than death, that the gifts and graces of God for us are as eternal as God is and again as the Bible declares, 'because Jesus lives, so shall we'.

H] The notion that this life ends in total oblivion is foreign to Christian theology. It was not the faith experience of the early Christians nor supported by the New Testament writers. Over 200 millennia vast numbers of people have witnessed by the simple reality of personal experience and missionary zeal the vitality of the Christian faith as one of belief in God the eternal One.

We are identified by God as the people of God both personally and together.

We are inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven, prepared for us and ready to receive us.

Several societies have set out to systematically and too often ruthlessly eliminate the Christian faith from their nations, most notably in recent years the Soviet Union and China. Christian faith did not die under several generations of suppression.

The assumption was that educated people would abandon faith in God and eternal life as being symptomatic of primitive superstition and ignorance. The educated discovered a harmony of Christian faith and science; a vision of belief that challenged and excited them. At profoundly significant times of our lives, birth, marriage, distress, joy, death, many millions of believers mark these events with worship and thanksgiving.

I] This truth is not to deny the reality of death with all its heartbreak and sorrow – remember the word that is translated 'wept' in the Bible's shortest verse, 'Jesus wept', is much more emotional in the original Greek – so much so that when those gathered saw the grief of Jesus they commented, "See how much he loved him!"

We are all called to the eternal values of heaven where nothing hinders the love of God and again are called by Jesus in the special prayer he gave us to seek by his grace to practice those values and so contribute to the transformation of the earth. When our time comes to make the transition from this world to the next we remain confident that because we trust in a perfect Saviour we will become eternal citizens of heaven and discover wonders beyond our comprehension.

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Feel free to contact me with questions, challenges or new insights.