Sermon for 32nd in Ordinary Year C

Readings: Job:19:23-27a; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5,13-17; Luke 20:27-38.

i

It’s a bit odd when you can find more talk about heaven outside the church than you find inside – but that is today’s strange reality in some places.

Since we are prone to say more than we should, or purport to know more than we do, when we do talk about heaven – perhaps it is not an entirely bad thing when we say nothing.

But we can’t keep quiet forever. Whilst the general popular culture continues to talk about “granny going to heaven”, the untimely death of a young person becoming “one of God’s angels” or a “shining star” in the firmament, the church has had less and less to say about heaven, until the only voices left are the narrowly sectarian or popular syncretistic schmaltz.

In the West particularly, where people have so much stake in this world and so much less concern for the world to come, there has been a tendency for the Church to say less and less about heaven and speak to more immediately “relevant” matters such as social exclusion, rich-poor divide, care for the environment, or world peace. No one could suggest they are not legitimate topics of Christian concern, or that they offer easy pickings for quick solutions, but when a church speaks about such matters to the exclusion of traditional subjects of Church doctrine, one does have to wonder who will talk about the spiritual foundations of our faith, if we don’t.

Many of our fellow Christians refuse to talk “pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die” theology, as they disparagingly dismiss it. Heaven has no intellectual *cache* nowadays. It is a mark of sophistication and intellectual pride to dismiss such things as heaven to the realm of children’s fairytales. Since the secular West is no longer interested in the traditional subjects of Christian doctrine, many Western Christians have chased after the secular crowd by dropping such troubling references and addressing more pressing worldly matters.

The advent of Islamic terrorism in the expectation of a copious supply of celestial virgins has not helped make talk of heaven any more credible for Christians either.

It was not always like this. People who lived constantly on the edge of death, much of it sudden and inexplicable to them, were obviously more prone to dwell on heavenly matters than we are today. Medieval Europe was obsessed by death, dying, hell and heaven, especially after the shock of the Black Death. But we should not think that it is only in modern times that people have mocked the very idea and discarded the notion altogether.

Job, Jesus and Paul each had to confront those who scoffed at their faith.

ii

To read the words of Job affirming that at the end, beyond this life, God will be his redeemer, is a remarkable thing, bearing in mind the terrible disasters Job suffered in his life. That he will see God “with his own eyes and not another” affirms a belief in personal existence beyond the grave, even if the precise translation of verse 26 which apparently supports the later Christian doctrine of resurrection of the body is actually less than clear.

Job is the last person who should be so confident in God’s ultimate mercy and love; yet despite mocking from his friends, Job’s affirmation of faith seems less pie-in-the sky wishful thinking, as you might expect, and comes across more as an expression of the existential human spirit:

That despite the inexplicable horrors that life can throw at a person, despite the injustice of it all – Job exemplifies human courage in the face of adversity, human hope in the face of disaster, human nobility in the face of an apparently meaningless reality. Instead of submitting to self-pity or fear, Job rises, as if on angels’ wings, to affirm God’s eternal love and the inalienable worth of human life.

ii

Those who did not believe in life after death in Jesus’ day were a small, but elite minority, the Sadducees. Taking a literalist view of the Books of Moses, they found no reference to resurrection and eternal life. They took the later development of this doctrine in subsequent scriptures, such as the *Book of Job* for instance, to be irrelevant.

Their traditional story of a woman who marries each of seven brothers in turn as each of them dies off is intended to mock Jesus’ belief in life after death. Since each brother fails to produce an heir through the woman, no brother can claim to have ascendancy over any other. The immoral scandal of a woman living as the wife of seven men in heaven is supposed to undermine the whole doctrine.

Jesus counters them by saying: Not everyone will be worthy enough to enter the new age of heaven – so be warned – pride comes before a fall. The Sadducees should be very careful what they airily dismiss.

He also says the life of heaven is not the same as earthly life – for instance, marriage which is for procreation is no longer required – but by their resurrection men and women become children of God and brother and sister to each other.

Lastly, Jesus says that the Sadducees should read Moses a bit more carefully, because if God can tell Moses that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, then they must still be alive in some sense, because God is God of the living not the dead.

I am aware that most scholars would consider 2 Thessalonians deutero-Pauline, but let us set that aside for now, and refer to Paul’s experience with those who rejected the notion of resurrection and eternal life – for irrespective of how much of Paul we find in 2 Thessalonians, we do know from the Corinthian correspondence that Paul faced such opponents.

Some of those Paul encountered from the Greek world would have believed in eternal life, or more precisely, immortality of the soul, but not have believed in resurrection. Stoics, Platonists, Jews and Romans would have had a variety of religious reasons to not believe in some, or all, or none, of Paul’s message. Books such as N.T. Wright’s *Resurrection* give a much fuller account than I can give today. I am barely scraping the surface of the matter. But N.T. Wright does have over 900 pages, to my three and a bit.

The passage from 2 Thessalonians 2 is a timely warning that because all talk of life after death must inevitably be wrapped in poetic imagery of banquets, ascending angels, and courts of justice, Christians are easy prey to confusion and doubt, as well as an easy target for mockery. It is hard enough to be certain of every aspect of God’s Spirit at work in our lives here and now; how much more reticent should we be when speaking about matters beyond our experience?

The Thessalonian Christians should not be alarmed by those who want to use the subject to instil fear in order to exert control. They should not become gullible to outlandish claims, such as, the Second Coming of Christ has already happened and somehow they have missed it.

We read about some self-proclaimed prophet or other leading his band of deluded followers up various hills every few months in anticipation of the imminent End of the world. Yet, however many failed prophecies accrue, there is always another group ready to be duped.

2 Thessalonians 2 employs a traditional part of the Jewish apocalyptic tradition in saying that the End will not come until a global confrontation with evil has taken place – a rebellion against God that is already at work in the world.

Then without further speculation, it simply affirms that the Thessalonian believers can relax in the comfort of knowing that they are saved by faith in Christ. Beyond that they do not need to fret. Stand firm in that hope.

iii

Whilst the Church in each generation may have to pull something old and something new from its treasure store in order to address the questions of the day, that is not the same as permitting the world to set the agenda and allowing parts of our faith which are temporarily out of fashion to fall out of the picture entirely.

Questions of heaven and hell are not today’s preoccupations, but that does not entitle us to forget them altogether. And if we stop talking about heaven, just because it is difficult to say anything in a language a secularised world would readily understand, we risk losing a great deal. We also risk selling the Gospel short.

Ladislaus Boros, a Hungarian Jesuit, said: “Perhaps the most urgent task is to testify that heaven exists.” Without that eternal perspective on human destiny, we are all at risk of being reduced to economic units in either a capitalist or communist machine, turned into political pawns, or just consumers that produce the profits for the oligarchs.

Heaven keeps us human in the fullest, noblest and most mysterious sense of the word. It speaks of our ability to dream, create new things, and transcend our limitations.

Eric Heller, a Czech-born Jewish essayist who emigrated to England to escape the Nazis in 1939, once wrote: “The idea of heaven has been let go and floated away out of reach, leaving us gradually to sink into hell.” (*The Disinherited Mind*).

How can we aspire to be what we could be, if we have lost the language to speak of it?

There are other places where I have written technical theology concerning heaven and life after death and there are many good books by good theologians you can search out, if you want to know more of the Church’s teaching on the matter.

Today, I simply wish to make the point that keeping the language alive is vital and witnessing to the hope of eternal life keeps the vision alive for all humanity to dream and hope and strive. Christians who tailor their words to conform to the prejudices of the present generation do them a disservice.

Heaven is part of the Gospel message despite the challenge it presents in today’s world. So I leave you with three quotations about heaven.

I hope you find them worth pondering.

“When I get to heaven, I shall see 3 wonders there: The first – to see many there whom I did not expect to see. Second – to miss many people I **did** expect to see. Third – and greatest of all, will be to find myself there.” John Newton.

“The path to heaven is measured by desire and not in miles.” (*The Cloud of Unknowing*)

And finally, the words of Jesus: “I am the Resurrection and the life; he who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:25).

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