

Between Heaven and Hell

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Introduction (Rev 20)

Between Heaven and Hell Sermon No 1, 29th April 2012

Simon Perry

A few years ago, Professor Robert Winston began a survey of children born in the year 2000, called, 'child of our time'. In it, he looked at families from a variety of social backgrounds around the UK, to look at how a child's upbringing and environment would affect their view of themselves and the world. And there was one test designed to gauge a child's sense of self-worth: he would have these toddlers draw a picture of something they liked – and on a table before them, would place five coloured stars, and ask each child, how many stars they thought their picture deserved. If the child thought their picture was fantastic, the child would take five stars; if they thought their picture was no good at all, they would take only one star. And it was utterly astonishing, how the majority of children took only one star – only one or two taking a couple more than one star.

And being as arrogant as I am about my parenting skills, I couldn't help repeating the experiment on my appropriately-aged boy. I got him to draw a picture, and then I placed the five coloured stars onto the table, and everything was set. "Do you understand what you've got to do?" (Nodding) You can have as many stars as you think your picture deserves? (Nodding). So, how many stars would you like? (reply: I don't want any stars.) What, none at all? (Shaking head and frowning. I want sweets).

I'm not sure how Professor Winston would analyse that. I suppose, with some caution, given that this is the same offspring have asked me how to spell DVD, who told his football coach that tic tacs are more important than tactics, and who tried to convince a Moslem friend of mine that Ramma-Damma-Ding-Dong is a religious festival.

Well, Professor Winston's point seems to be that the way we are brought up shapes the way we understand our place in the universe, our sense of ourselves, and our relationships with others. In Christian history – our place in the world has been largely shaped by our views of heaven above, hell below – and earth in the middle. But really – this seems like a primitive mythology that has done nothing but keep common people in a perpetual state of irrational fear, guilt and a sense of never being good enough to meet God's high standards. In fact, this is widely understood as a crucial aspect of the so called 'Good News' of the Christian faith.

So, heaven is the metaphysical world above where God lives. At the end of the life, if you've been either a virtuous, sinless, blameless embodiment of selfless moral perfection – or a right wing, conservative evangelical – then you're welcomed into heaven, where you will spend all eternity in the company of other intolerable individuals. If, on the other hand, you have committed genocide, parricide, infanticide, regicide or a minor parking offence – then you rightly deserve to spend all eternity in hell where you will be prodded with red-hot pokers by Simon Cowell.

Heaven, of course, is up there. Hell is down there. And in between – here we are on planet earth – spending our lives with no other purpose than trying to secure a favourable eternity.

Such are the myths of the afterlife presented still, by many Christians today. After all, the bible tells them so! Or does it? That will be the theme for this term's Sunday evening sermons. Because the systematic beliefs about heaven as the destination of the righteous and hell, of the unrighteous – cannot be read off the surface of Christian Scripture. There are traces of such a belief system in Ancient Greece and Egypt – even among pre-Christian Anglo

Saxon religions. But, whilst the texts of Scripture are sometimes quoted to support this view – it is not to be found in the Christian Bible.

I had to write an extended essay on this topic as an undergraduate – and an unfortunate typo made its way past my spell-checker: namely, that hell is the post-mortem destiny not of the unsaved – but of the unshaved, who were thus condemned to spend eternity in torment. My essay came back with a comment in the margin: “Bad news for the Greek Orthodox!” But studying as a proper evangelical, I expected to find evidence all over the bible for the reality of hell. In fact, it became clear that throughout the early history of Israel, there was virtually nothing on the subject. It was only, very late, that it became clear – just how many thousands of people who worshipped a God of Justice, went to their graves without ever seeing Justice. So of course, for God to be just – death could not be the final word. There must be some form of reckoning, beyond the grave.

By the time of the New Testament, there is plenty of talk about the Kingdom of God, which many people still take to refer to heaven. But it does not. To Jesus’ first century listeners, the kingdom of God is a political philosophy, a coming era where government would be just – and where Israel’s God is acknowledged by the whole world. And much of Jesus’ teaching is concerned with pointing out that ironically, when God’s Kingdom comes – there will be plenty of hard-core Jewish believers who will not find themselves included in it. But this is the Kingdom of God, not heaven. In fact, the New Testament says very little about heaven. A lot about Resurrection – but hardly anything about heaven.

But then we come our reading in which the talk of heaven seems unambiguous. Unfortunately, it comes from the book of Revelation. The final book of the bible, full of bizarre and incomprehensible visions – a book whose author, Richard Dawkins is convinced, was on acid. But when you study this book within the context of apocalyptic literature, a different picture emerges.

If you are a first century Jewish person living under an oppressive, imperial regime – like that of Rome – and you have a message for fellow believers, then you may need to find a way of encouraging your contemporaries in a way that raises no suspicion. The apocalyptic literature of Revelation is a recognised genre, that carries a subversive political agenda straight under the nose of the Roman authorities. One New Testament scholar described Revelation as the most powerful piece of resistance literature from the first century.

The two principle characters of the book refer to two wings of the empire’s power. The hard-imperialism of the beast (the Roman military machine) and the soft imperialism of the whore (the economic laws, the worship of Roman ideology). And these aspects of Roman power were impossible to resist – and as history shows – many Christians went to their deaths because they would not buy into the power games of the empire. They would not worship Caesar as Lord.

Of course, this passage is often seen as a reference to the end of time. And this reign of a thousand years is assumed to be an actual, literal, chronological reign of Christians... Whilst martyrs of the Christian faith were put to death like Jesus himself – it looks very much as though Christianity is powerless to resist the power of the empire. But John’s vision is for a heavenly perspective. That is – though their death seems to be the final word – we read here about a second death in which they are vindicated. This is a vision, in other words, in which the injustices of an oppressive empire, in the end – their rule, their influence over the world, their rule of a thousand years – is seen as more powerful than that of the great leaders and empires and kings. John uses the idea of a Thousand Year Reign to show the victory of the martyrs over the beast.

The authority of an imperial regime that seems to have power of life and death over all its subjects, is seriously relativized when we read that beyond the grave, there is a second death.

It is a vision in which justice is sought beyond the grave. But it doesn't actually say very much about heaven. Nor does it call upon Christian believers to buckle down, because everything will be alright when they get to heaven and their enemies are consigned to hell.

Here, in one of few texts of the New Testament that actually makes explicit reference to Heaven – it is really an encouragement to the on-going struggle for justice here upon the earth. From this, of course, a belief in some form of afterlife can be implied – but it is pretty vague.

The bible is not a metaphysical handbook that gives us details of heaven and earth and hell.

What the authors of Scripture do offer, is a way of being in the world that opens up the cosmic dimensions of the everyday. It is to those authors that we will be listening over the next few weeks as we look again at heaven above and hell below and whatever it is that fills the space in between.

Between Heaven and Hell Sermon No 2

Professor Robin Kirkpatrick

SERMON: MAY 13th

The theme that the Chaplain has devised for the addresses this term, is, to my mind, an especially troubling one. 'Between Heaven and Hell': the very word 'between' is disconcerting – carrying the suggestion that our lives are lived in dangling uncertainty between the extremes of misery and beatitude. More troubling still, tonight's reading from scripture provides no easy consolation or guide as to how we 'in-betweeners' should orient ourselves. Proverbs speaks of fear and awe as the beginning of wisdom and launches a satirical attack on 'Lady Stupidity', that flirtatious being who distracts so many minds from the awful awareness of ultimate realities – of our fragility and certain death – and seduces the academic mind, in particular, into thinking that its own little research field is the be-all and end-all of truth. It is possible, perhaps, to wring some comfort (and I shall try) from psalm 16 – the Psalms being the songs of those still waiting in the dark. But this cannot erase the terrifyingly unambiguous revelation of judgement that is offered by St Matthew. All too easily, we think of Judgement as an excitingly dramatic – if vaguely distant - scenario. That seems, largely, to be the spirit in which Michelangelo painted his grandiose fresco in the Sistine Chapel. And a musical equivalent might be the Dies Irae of Verdi's Requiem. These are both thrilling works of art, but also, I suggest, rather bad theology. Judgement, as St Matthew conceives it, is not remotely arty or something we can chat about in a seminar. It is happening here and now, in Cambridge, in the streets we pedal through, in every face we encounter. The one criterion is that we should respond to every instance that we meet of poverty, pain and violence. Those who recognise in others the signs of our human need for life are saved; they become all one with that divine love that created life in the first place. Those who turn away – who turn away from life as life now is – will themselves be turned away.

Now, it is not my job – thank heaven – to work through the implications of St Matthew's inescapable words. That, I take it, is what priests are here to do, supported, of course, by all the resources of the Church: by vocation, communal prayer, liturgy, tradition and even by biblical scholarship. But I shall want to hold up to question - to judgement, even – a work which, flirtatiously, has attracted my own academic attention over many decades and might, indeed be said, to have invented our modern idea of Heaven and Hell. I'm referring to Dante's *Commedia*. Michelangelo read Dante with the utmost admiration, and so did Verdi. But Dante's influence doesn't end there. Brad Pitt, for instance, makes a movie called *7* and thinks he is referring to the punishments that Dante devises for the Seven Deadly Sins.. And when your favourite uncle sets the summer barbecue on fire, he is quite likely to say: 'Phew: it was just like Dante's Inferno!'

Now, leaving Michelangelo and Verdi aside, neither Brad Pitt nor your favourite uncle really get Dante right. Look at the back page of the handout, and you'll see that the Inferno has surprisingly little to say about the seven deadlies. Then look at the first page, and you'll see that ice not fire is the ultimate condition of damnation. I'll try to say why this should be in a moment. But there is a worse mistake still. And this is to presume that Dante were himself as obsessed by Hell as our over-heated imaginations so often suppose he was. Evidence of that lurid misapprehension could be drawn from sale-statistics. Every year, tens of thousands of copies of the *Commedia* are sold – not only in Tunbridge Wells but also in Turkey, Iraq and Bangladesh. Yet sales of the Inferno out-pace the *Paradiso* and *Purgatorio* at least three to one (at least in Tunbridge Wells) . And this, I think, is an indication of an awful error which we all commit whenever we say, with a knowing smirk: 'Ah. The devil has all the best tunes.' Dante would say exactly the opposite, and indeed our fascination with Hell would seem to him the first step in our own descent into the abyss.

Think for a moment of Paradise as Dante depicts it. Now the crucial thing really is that Dante does not pretend that his poem is a picture of what Heaven actually will be like. It is all too easy to suppose that we shall find in his poem a

holiday video of some idyllic destination – angels surfing the celestial foam while saints sip endlessly at delectable pinacoladas, their earphones tuned eternally to Classic FM, immortally mellow. A pleasing dream but ultimately as tedious as other people's holiday snaps (and Classic FM) must always be. Yet the Paradiso is not like that. In two senses, rather, it is an invitation to get real.

In reality, as Dante insists, neither he nor any one else can represent what God in his Heaven is actually like. In that sense he admits, like Proverbs, that awe in the face of the unknown is the beginning of Wisdom. But mystery need not be only a restriction. It can also be an attraction, an impulse to exploration, a source of wonder and enlargement. And the Paradiso at every point responds to that attraction. Get real: no human being really wants to live with evil. We might occasionally relish a disaster movie, or, munching our cultural pop-corn, enjoy the witchcraft of, say, Shakespeare's Macbeth. But no one in their right, human mind would want to live under Macbeth's regime – or Hitler's or Pol Pot's. Just look instead, as the Paradiso does, at the mysterious evidence of goodness in the created order. Even if we don't know where it all comes from or where it is going, it is there: in the beauty of things and of persons, in the cadence of a voice, in the swish of your lover's hair and above all in the virtue of human achievement, in the skills and sheer brilliance that we all, at heart, want to celebrate.

And that is what the Paradiso does. This is not some soft-focus reminiscence of an avuncular God-trip, but rather a constantly evolving meditation on the mystery of goodness and love, an act of praise to the glory of creation, unremittingly attentive to the details of the created world in all its variety. For Dante, goodness is not some pale principle of nice, neat conformity. It is the energy that is generated when our eyes discern and recognise the beauty of particular things and particular persons. On this understanding, it is entirely rational (as it might also be for Richard Dawkins) to want the things we applaud to go on existing – evolving before us – for ever. But that is why, for Dante, faith, hope and caritas are also reasonable, which is to say essentially human, attributes: faith carries with it the unshakeable belief that things and persons do matter; hope demands that they always should matter; and it is love that leads us to participate in the existence of all good things.

This, then, is what you'll be missing if you purchase only the Inferno. Actually, one shouldn't miss this, even in the Inferno – unless one is drugged by a narcotic predilection for naughtiness. Properly understood, Hell, for Dante, is the wilful negation of all the possibilities that he contemplates in the Paradiso. That is why 'ice' is the final manifestation of what Hell amounts to, and also why treachery is, for Dante, the worst of all sins. Ice is the extinction of any possibility of renewal, alteration, surprise and variety. Treachery, likewise, is the destruction of all the bonds of trust and productive relationship, an attempt to control other people and manipulate to our own ends their essential, and God-given 'otherness'. Sartre famously declares that 'Hell is other people'. This, in Dante's perspective, is an utterly stupid thing to say. Where Paradise is an absolute openness to the mystery that other beings exist at all, Hell is, for Dante, to be frozen into one's own boring ego, utterly unresponsive to the need, or newness – or otherness – that displays itself in every breath of creation. It follows that Satan, as Dante imagines him, is not some 'ooh-aren't-you-awful!' embodiment of demonic iron-pumping. He is rather – as seen in the last canto of the Inferno – a massive but ridiculous machine, flapping his once-angelic wings with the sole purpose, now, of refrigerating the lower circles of Hell.

Conclusions of this order are, in theological terms, consistent with the realisation, developed since the time of St Augustine, that evil is not some power diametrically opposed to goodness but rather an absolute negation, emptiness and lack of vitality. That, however, is not the end of the matter. We still have to confront that perverse human inclination – registered in the shock-horror of Michelangelo's last judgement, as also in any tabloid slaving over 'celebrities-without-their-make-up' – to be hallucinated by the supposed reality of violence, cruelty and ugliness, moral and otherwise. It is as if the human mind needed Hell and certainly was capable of creating it without any help at all from God. And that dreadful thought is certainly registered in Dante's Inferno. There is very little God in this part of the Commedia. Judgement here is seen as the logical consequence of human actions, which,

left to themselves, will contradict and ruin the potentialities that, mysteriously, all human beings possess and were created to enjoy.

But in pursuing this understanding Dante also displays, self-critically, the extent to which his own mind can become complicit with a perverse appetite for the infernal. His imagination can produce scenes of nauseous, squelchy horror far worse than anything in *The Exorcist One, Two or even Three*. I will spare you the detail – but am referring here to *Inferno Canto 25*. Worse still, however, is the sense that, in trying to anticipate Divine Judgement, Reason – for which Dante has a very high regard – can itself become obsessed to the point of self-destruction with the analysis and diagnosis of moral failings. If you scrutinise the map of Hell, you'll look in vain for many of the Seven Deadly Sins. (That's was Brad Pitt's mistake – and actually there are as many adulterers in Purgatory and Paradise as there are in Hell.) You will, however, find there a scheme derived from pre-Christian philosophers, such as Aristotle and Cicero, invoked to provide a taxonomy of all our possible failings and degeneracies. Significantly, as you go down the sliding scale, the worst sins of all are those where reason – and rational discourse – turn against themselves in acts of deception and cleverly excogitated fraud – which is why for Dante, flattery – a wily art – is so much worse than red-blooded fornication.

Yet Dante is also agonisingly aware that his own language, his own skill in analysis, can itself become complicit in propagating a destructive delusion. At one point (illustrated on the hand out, page one) he shows himself tearing the hair out of the frozen scalp of one of the traitors and, treacherous himself, refusing to honour a promise he has made to clear away the tears that congeal in the eye-sockets of these petrified sinners. Don't traitors, after all, in simple justice, deserve such treatment?

Pursuing this line of interpretation, one would come to the conclusion that in Dante's view the most intelligent of human judges can easily become a sadistic voyeur. And there is a comic version of this terrible possibility, frequently played out by devoted readers of the *Commedia*. It's a kind of ethical Desert Island Discs: what are your seven favourite vices, and how would you rank them? Is lying worse than shop-lifting; is gambling worse than hypocrisy; is plagiarism worse (or better) than mean-spirited Tripos examining? (Ah yes!) And to what circle of Hell would you confine the traffic warden who has just now wheel-clamped your newly acquired Mercedes? It's fascinating. But there is also the serious question here – which, I take to be a seriously Christian question – of how one is ever to get out of this rational but infernal circle. St Paul in the Epistle to the Romans states the question very acutely when he painfully recognises that Law, though good in itself, can be taken over by Sin and become, in effect, a source of sin: the very act of reckoning what is a sin is can degenerate into self-destructive fixation. For St Paul, the way out of that impasse is to acknowledge God as the transcendent source of all justice, and, equally, of all goodness: we may tremble in the face of an infinite justice which no finite mind can encompass. But that trembling also shatters our own self-imposed paralysis. And then – through Christ and the Holy Spirit – faith, hope and charity will tell us that humanity was loved into existence by Original Goodness so that, despite its own inclination to self-destruction, it will always be sustained by that goodness in pursuit of an ultimate harmony.

This, broadly, is Dante's answer, too. But in developing his own version of it, he offers, I suggest, a view of the true, real world, the 'other' world – the world of others – which has a particular relevance to 'in-betweeners' such as we are ourselves. And to see this we need, in conclusion, to move to Purgatory, which is the middle realm in Dante's narrative, transitional between the absolute non-existence of Hell and the unimaginable manifestation of life which the Paradiso seeks to explore.

Now Purgatory has acquired rather a bad name, particularly among protestants – and with good reason. The late medieval Church was deeply guilty of perverting the idea of Purgatory – so that the buying and selling of pardons on behalf of the dear- departed, still languishing in the middle realm, became a kind of papal protection-racket – which

Luther rightly rumbled. But Dante's Purgatory offers a very different picture – and one which makes me, at least, recommend Purgatory as the best of destinations for any post-mortem holiday. I'm not alone in this recommendation. Strikingly, it is Dante's Purgatorio which has attracted the attention of modern poets, most especially T.S. Eliot, Seamus Heaney and Samuel Beckett. And each in his own fashion finds a way, with Dante in mind, of transforming our modern condition of anxious waiting, betwixt and between, into a positive mode of attention. Yes: we may be more comfortable nowadays with relativities than with absolutes. But as we wait, we can also watch, our eyes sharpening for any glint of goodness, any chance of bringing relativities into relationship. .

So where and what is Dante's Purgatory? Look at the hand-out and you will see that his Purgatory is an island-mountain located in the Southern Hemisphere, at the exact antipodes of Jerusalem. And how did that Mountain get there? Well: when Satan fell from Heaven he hit the earth exactly at the eventual location of Jerusalem and, driving into the depths of the Southern Hemisphere, extruded the mass of earth which now forms Mount Purgatory. Oh yes! And on the top of this earthly mountain, God cultivated the Garden of Eden.

Now if all of this were true, Purgatory would, I calculate, be somewhere around the Falkland Islands. And of course what we have in Dante's poem is an exuberant piece of science-fiction. But the symbolism of it all is profoundly significant and profoundly hopeful. In the first place, even the fall of Satan is seen here not as a miserably failed rebellion but as the means of creating the possibility of new, Edenic life. And, likewise, Purgatory is a place where human beings are once again free to recover all those possibilities of human existence which, in our earthly lives, we ourselves have lost through our own complicity with the anti-life of evil. We climb the mountain. That is a painful business – and it may take us many centuries. But we do so, on Dante's account, not to transcend our human natures but to recognise our original goodness and recover a working grasp on what we were always meant to be. So Dante's Purgatory is a natural world, positioned in space and time. Which means, symbolically, that nature itself, for Dante, is good and glorious and, absolutely, worth working for – and working with. But above all his Purgatory is a place of human community, where persons intelligently listen to the life-stories of others. For the purpose of being in Dante's Purgatory is not simply to refine – in some kind of spiritual health spa – our own personal virtue, but to acknowledge and recover that unity with all other human beings which God originally intended us to enjoy. That unity is expressed and consolidated in prayer and praise. We pray for the dead and praise their achievements. The dead pray for us and provide us with examples and encouragement. And, in all of this the fundamental demand that is made upon us is a demand not for judgement but for recognition – not pernicky discrimination (Iliis, Iliis and spectacular Ills) but an intelligent attention to our fellow inhabitants in this in-between world.

So how does Dante conduct himself in Purgatory? We have seen him a moment ago tearing the hair out of the head of a traitor. And pretty awful things happen in Purgatory, too. At one point Dante comes across a group of penitents who are slumped one against the other like beggars plying their trade on King's Parade. And, horror of horrors, they are weeping through eyelids which have, temporarily, been sewn together with iron wires that pierce their cheeks. (That, apparently, is a device from medieval falconry, intended to ensure that falcons were wholly dependent on their handlers.) These penitents are the envious – and in envy our sin is to look at the good that others display and, so far from recognising or praising that good, desire to possess it for our own, private satisfaction. Envy could thus be diagnosed as a kind of depressive egotism, the utter denial of generosity. Yet in seeing these sinners – who are all confident, eventually, of reaching Paradise – Dante demands not just pity but also courtesy, generosity and above all recognition: it is he says absolutely outrageous that he should be able to see these blind beggars when they cannot see him. We are free – and fully human - when we can look each other in the eye and find delight in doing so. Dante's Purgatory is, finally, the God-given opportunity to train ourselves in practising just that: eye-contact.

Now are we, I ask, so very far here from St Matthew's Gospel? The Gospel, likewise, demands that, here and now in our present Purgatorial in-betweenness, we look the local beggar in the eye and recognise her or his divine reality. As to what will happen to those goats who do not, I leave the Chaplain to explain. But the liturgy and readings he has

organised this evening do stand as an encouragement to the sheep among us. The Psalm – written by David, who was, of course, a murderer and adulterer – speaks of a wisdom that we acquire in the night, in our dark, inward parts, in the midst of our sins. But the virtue of such wisdom is that it will lead us out of ourselves to recognise and praise the endless, illuminated glory of the created order. So, too, the concluding hymn: ‘Glory to Thee My God this Night’. This will be sung to the Tallis canon setting. And a canon is a kind of Dantean Purgatory. We sing but wait for others to join us in singing, attentive to the moment of our entry into the over-arching song. And that song is endlessly self-generating. As voice picks up on voice, the pattern could go on for ever. Let’s hope+

Between Heaven and Hell: Sunday, May 13th 2012



Gustave Dore: Inferno 32, where Dante encounters traitors frozen in ice at the bottom of Hell

'The Earth Shall Endure and Blossom Forth in Spring' - or maybe it won't?

STEPHEN TRUDGILL Robinson College

The earth is our solid ground – or so we think: we in western society might think of the heavens as above and hell as below, but in between we have at least our own reassuring reality of 'terra firma' to stand on. Thus, the terms 'earth' and 'soil' can be imbued with reassuring notions of reliability such as stability, fertility, provision and abundance such as in my title: 'The earth shall endure and blossom forth in spring' which is a line from *Das Lied von der Erde* by Mahler using words from Chinese folk poetry (by Li Tai Po translated into German by Bethge). But how valid are such appreciations? I think that when we look more closely at our cultural constructs of the earth we often find that soil is a resource rather taken for granted and it is often not appreciated that it is actually more fragile than we think – and that we can lose it all too easily.

In the 1880 novel *La Terre* by Emile Zola there is one of the classic appreciations of the soil. The central character is very attached to the land. On revisiting his land, once lost and now regained, the text says that "[he] stood for a long time contemplating [the field]: it was still there and seemed to be in good heart, nobody had harmed it. His heart overflowed with joy at the thought that it was his again, and forever. He stooped and picked up a lump of earth in both hands, crumbled it, sniffed it and let it trickle through his fingers. It was his own good earth, and he went home humming a tune, as though intoxicated by its smell."

It might however be argued that is this contact which we have lost, to our cost. It is often said of the Bible that Jesus based many of his stories on the common experience of agriculture because everyone would understand them - such as in the parable of the sower. With the movement of people to towns throughout history and the differentiation of labour, agriculture changes from being something that most people might be involved in to the specialism of the farmer, with specialist knowledge. Thus, a direct spiritual attachment to the earth, such as recorded by Zola, and the common experience of agriculture, declines, though there still can be a positive, if romantic, attachment to the land felt by many people.

It is, however, this loss of contact with the soil which can be implicated in the neglect and misuse of soil, such as in the North American 'Dust Bowl' with its descriptive epithets of 'earth butchery', 'predatory agriculture', 'spoliation' and 'exhaustion' in what is seen as the "most rapid rate of wasteful land use in the history of the world". Steinbeck (1939) in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath* clearly blames the detachment from the land for this misuse of soil. He writes of a farmer climbing aboard a tractor, losing contact with the earth:

He [the farmer climbing into the tractor rather than walking behind a horse-drawn plough] could not see the land as it was, he could not smell the land as it smelled; his feet did not stamp the clods or feel the warmth and power of the earth. He sat in an iron seat and stepped on iron pedals.... He did not know or own or trust or beseech the land.... He loved the land no more than the bank loved the land.... Behind the tractor rolled the shining disks, cutting the earth with blades—not ploughing but surgery, pushing the cut earth ... no man had crumbled a hot clod in his fingers and let the earth sift past his fingertips.... The land bore under iron, and under iron gradually died; for it was not loved or hated, it had no prayers or curses.

There is yet more, though, to our relationship with soil than the way in which personal detachment from it and mechanisation can lead to misuse. It is something to do with the way in which soil can help us, but that that there may be a struggle involved. The novel 'The Growth of Soil' by Knut Hamsun (1921) is described in the 1980 edition publisher's blurb as "the story of Isak, 'the tiller of the ground, body and soul'... the book sinks its roots into man's deepest myths about his struggle to cultivate the land and make it fertile." It describes how he worked on the land—

“there were stones and roots to be dug up and cleared away, and the meadow to be levelled ready for next year” — and of the pleasure when the fields and meadows were looking good. Here the notions of struggle, mastery and productivity are embedded in the text and become metaphors for the human endeavour.

Struggle is indeed seen as a universal part of our relationship with nature as whole in Kahn’s (2001) book on *The Human Relationship with Nature*. He quotes Rolston (1997) that: “Environmental life, including human life, is nursed in struggle; ... If nature is good, it must be both an assisting and resisting reality. We cannot succeed unless it can defeat us.” Thus it is not uncommon to find things in nature that are both valued but also simultaneously autonomous and thereby may not necessarily easily facilitate us. The ‘resisting reality’ can be well seen in the poem *Stony Grey Soil* by Patrick Kavanagh, in which “soil” is in part used metaphorically for his origins and early days in which the intractable stony, grey soil held him back: “clogged the foot of my boyhood” and “burgled the bank of my youth”.

If you look at the representations of soil in poetry in general, you can indeed find more of the ‘assisting and resisting’ duality stressed by Kahn and Rolston. There are negative notions recording soil can be simply dismissed as dirt. There is also a sense of obduracy, a resistance to our will during attempts at cultivation – with epithets such as barren, stubborn and pestilential – revealing that because we depend so much on the soil it becomes hated if it cannot be bent to our will. Or it can be much loved if it does and there are indeed positive notions which record a bountiful, rich, fruitful, celebrated nature.

So soil is, it seems, indeed seen as either unhelpful or bounteous – as in the stony ground and the fertile ground of the parable of the sower. Cultural geographers tell me that this is a gendered narrative, displaying a male attitude to soil that is akin to attitudes to women. Be that as it may, while we can suggest this may be something to do with simultaneously appearing to cherish something of value while actually abusing it, there is, I think, something even more fundamental involved. This is that in nearly all cultural writings on soil there appears to be underlying, unwritten and unchallenged assumption that the soil is an infinite resource - and thus perhaps needs no special care. There is scant reference to the origin or loss of soils which is precisely what is missing. That is what is wrong with our cultural attitudes to soil – we have lost the idea of creation.

While rates of soil formation can be rapid, as in the deposits which follow floods, it is generally at rates of only a few mm per year from rock weathering. There is scant conception that soil came from somewhere, has an origin and is therefore actually finite and can be lost. Writing on soil conservation an author R K Bryan (1981, p. 207) observed that if the loss of one grain of soil had been prevented by each word written on soil erosion, then there would be no soil erosion - but it is in fact an increasing problem. Why is this?

I think that is because somehow we feel no guilt. Guilt is a narrative which we readily reach for in other spheres of human existence, so it is strange that it seems absent here. Conceiving that global warming is our fault is something we readily go along with – it is additionally comforting, because it gives us the notion that we might be able to do something about it. But where is the guilt for soil erosion? This loss of precious earth? One might conclude that the conception of soil as an almost inert solid entity means that it can be taken for granted and neglected without needing our care. Why worry about soil? It is not surely durable, infinite—and thus reassuring? This seems to lie at the heart of the paradox that soil is certainly valued but also thereby neglected – it is because it is just ‘there’ - and that is our problem.

The name Adam is thought to be derived from the Hebrew *Adamah* for ground or land and so if Genesis teaches us that when God breathed on the dust (*Adamah*) of the ground he made man (*Adam*), we might ponder more on the

soil. In Genesis 3: 19 are the words: In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. Rupert Brooke had his most eloquent expression of this when considering dying abroad as a soldier 'In that rich earth a richer dust concealed' but even most un-poetic and ardent atheist might admit that wheat to make bread grows in soil and surely realises that geochemical cycling has an inevitability. We can only conclude that we may regard soil as dirt, but it is surely where we come from, what sustains us and where we go back to – and that the earth might well 'endure and blossom forth in spring' – but only if we actually look after it. Source: Trudgill, S. T. (2006). "Dirt Cheap" - cultural constructs of soil: a challenge for education about soils? *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 30 (1), 7-14
doi:10.1080/03098260500499576

'He Ascended Into Heaven'

Between Heaven and Hell Sermon No 5

Prof. Morna Hooker, Robinson 20 May 2012

'He descended into hell;

The third day he rose again from the dead;

He ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of God the Father almighty.'

Those three short sentences lie at the heart of the creed that we so often find ourselves saying, and they confront us with enormous problems. It is no wonder that they are met with scorn by the so-called new atheists. What upon earth does it mean to say that Christ descended, rose and ascended? All three statements are expressed in the mythological language of the time, for the peoples of the ancient world believed that they lived on a flat earth, with heaven up there, and Hades down below. If Christ had died, then he had joined the dead, who disappeared into Hades; if he had been raised from the dead, then he was seen again on earth; and if he had returned to God the Father, then he must have ascended to God in heaven. Here is the three-decker universe of our Sermon series' title.

When I was a small girl – which, you will realize, was a very long time ago – we used to sing a hymn which began 'There's a friend for little children, above the bright blue sky'. Any educational psychologists among you will be able to tell me whether or not it is wise to encourage children to use mythological language in this way, for when they grow up they are likely to discard not only the literal but the metaphysical meaning as well. You may have noticed, however, that Charles Wesley used very similar ideas in the hymn we sang just now – though in far more sophisticated language – when he described Jesus as 'parted from our sight, high above yon azure height'. And though Wesley belonged to a far less astronomically-educated age than our own, I am quite sure that he did not believe that the throne to which he says Christ returned was literally perched somewhere up above on a cloud.

This is the language of myth – but myth does not, contrary to common usage, refer to something untrue, but rather to an attempt to express truth in picture-language. Dante's hell, we learned last week, cannot be accurately located.

The earth, we discovered long ago, is not flat but round. And the Russian cosmonaut Gagarin was said to have flown in space but seen no God there.

Of course he hadn't, since God is not to be found sitting on an azure throne or even on a cloud. But the imagery is powerful, nevertheless. Myth is the language which serves to describe the indescribable. The Christian declaration that Christ ascended into heaven uses the imagery of space and time to describe a truth that lies outside space and time.

Centuries before Christ was born, Solomon used spatial imagery in the same way. He knew perfectly well that 'heaven and the highest heaven' could not contain the God whom he worshipped. He nevertheless built a Temple which could in a sense be regarded as the dwelling-place of God, the symbol of God's presence with his people. And

even though 'heaven and the highest heaven' could not contain this God, Solomon's addressed him with the words 'Hear in heaven your dwelling place'. God was not confined to the Temple, for he was the God of the whole earth; neither was he confined to heaven, since he was far greater than the highest heaven. Yet the Temple and heaven acted as symbols of God.

And so I come to my picture, which some of you will have seen before, but which I cannot resist using once again, since it is such a delight. It represents one of the glorious stained glass windows in Fairford parish church, and the part of the window which concerns us is the third panel from the left. Almost the entire panel is taken up with what looks like a gigantic green mushroom, but is in fact intended to represent the mountain from which Jesus is said to have ascended, though how anyone but an experienced rock climber armed with crampons and ropes could possibly have got to its top is not clear. Since the window is tall and thin so is the mountain, but its enormous height reminds us of the great distance between earth and heaven. It would seem that this mountain has served as a kind of giant rocket-launching pad, for at its foot are the 11 disciples, gazing up to heaven, and at the very top of the window is a black square – though whether this is meant to represent the black hole of the unknown into which Jesus is disappearing or the bottom of his clothing I am not sure. At the base of the black square, however, Jesus' two feet can clearly be seen as he vanishes from view.

Last week we heard something of what Dante saw when he was taken on a guided tour of hell, purgatory, and heaven – the kind of escorted tour that Thomas Cook was later to make famous, though his tours were to less exotic destinations. On such a tour the interesting features of the country through which one was travelling were pointed out. But many centuries before Dante, Jewish writers had composed similar travel yarns, describing how one of the great figures of the past – the figure of Enoch was a popular choice – had been taken around heaven and shown the sights. Of course Enoch saw God on his throne, and the righteous around him. But was he seeing a vision of the future – what would be true, at the end of time, or was he seeing into heaven as it is now?

That question is in fact a meaningless one, because 'heaven', like God himself, is outside both time and space. We cannot locate heaven, any more than we can locate God himself. 'Thy kingdom come,' we pray, longing for a better time; 'thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven'. Already God's will is done in heaven, then, because already he is king, already he rules, already his kingdom exists, and already men and women are obedient to him. Thy will be done, on earth as it is heaven – and it is as though this world were a copy of another world – a parallel universe, a kind of mirror image of this one. Here things go awry, because men and women disobey God's will, but in heaven, all is as God planned it to be.

In the Gospels we're told of how, on one occasion, the Pharisees asked Jesus to tell them when the Kingdom of God would arrive. It's no good saying 'look, it's here', or 'there it is', he replied – no good trying to pin it down, to say when or where it would arrive, because the Kingdom is among you. In other words, it's a present reality – provided we are prepared to enter it. In the Fourth Gospel Jesus rarely refers to the Kingdom of God – instead he speaks about eternal life – not something to be hoped for (or dreaded) in the future, but a quality of life to be enjoyed here and now. Heaven, in other words, is all about us, if only we are aware of it – a parallel universe, if only we can enter it.

How does one describe something that lies outside our time and space? Writers and artists alike use metaphors familiar to them. How else can one describe the unknown, except by using images that we know? So heaven is described as an endless banquet – an enjoyable occasional event, but even feasts would surely get a little boring if they went on for ever. In some religions, heaven seems to be envisaged as an endless sexual orgy. The author of the book of Revelation has a more aesthetic understanding of heaven. The righteous have harps, he tells us, and continually sing a new song: so, choir, heaven is going to be an endless choir-practice, with Tim Brown

conducting! Elsewhere, the author of this book speaks of the elders prostrating themselves before the throne of God, and casting down their crowns at his feet. If they are to keep this up for all eternity, they will need to keep jumping up and casting down their crowns again; I'm afraid heaven sounds too much like an endless work-out in the gym to attract me. But of course heaven lies outside time, so boredom does not enter into the equation. Just as Dante's descriptions of hell were attempts to describe what it means to be cut off from God, so these images are different attempts to express what it means to live in the presence of God.

The picture of a three-decker universe was an attempt to describe in three dimensions something which lies outside both space and time. How else can one speak of heaven except in terms of what is familiar to us? Yet heaven simply does not fit either into space or into Einstein's fourth dimension of time. But that does not mean that the myth is untrue. I discovered recently that physicists have outgrown these four dimensions. Talking to a group of alumni – all of them mathematicians – on high table recently I asked them whether they believed the extraordinary theory that there are no fewer than 11 dimensions, and was assured that they did. The 11th dimension is apparently infinitesimally narrow, and infinitesimally long. And at its other end, I am told, we can expect to find a parallel universe. No doubt some of you know all about these theories, but to a non-scientist like myself it all sounds like science fiction – or perhaps like the story of Alice, falling down a very long and very narrow rabbit-hole, and finding another world at the other end. But maybe scientists – and theologians – in their different ways are right. There is a reality which lies beyond our common perceptions of space and time.

The story of the Ascension points to realities that cannot be adequately expressed in images that belong to this world, existing as it does within the constraints of time and space. Notice how the story itself reminds us of this by describing the disciples' reaction to what happens. It is a common device used by the evangelists to point to the reality behind a story by showing us the disciples doing and saying stupid things, so prompting us to think 'Oh – they've clearly got it wrong, so what does this story really mean?' And so it is here. First of all, the disciples ask Jesus if this is the time that they have been waiting for – in effect, the end of time. And Jesus rebukes them for thinking that dates and times are of any significance, since God is already King, and what is truly important is that the power of the Holy Spirit is going to sweep them off their feet. Time doesn't matter, for God is outside time – what matters is that they get on with the work he has given them to do. That's where they will find the Kingdom – the rule – of God.

And the second mistake follows on immediately. Note how in our picture the disciples stand at the foot of the mountain, gazing intently upwards at those two disappearing feet. 'They were gazing intently into the sky as he went,' Luke tells us, and all at once two angels stood beside them. 'Men of Galilee,' they ask, 'why are you standing there looking up into the sky?' God is not confined by space, any more than he is by time. There is no point in gazing into heaven, for Jesus will return to them, and what they have to do is to get on with the task he has given them. It's in doing that that they will find him.

Whether, outside space and time, there exists a parallel universe in which we shall all twang our harps or spend eternity researching in some heavenly library, or doing whatever else is for us the best way in which to worship God

I do not know. What the story of the ascension teaches us, once we unpack it from its spatial and temporal imagery, is that Christ himself is no longer constrained by time and space but is with us here, now, and for ever. And even though we continue to live in a world governed by time and space, we can choose, by the way we live, to share here and now in the Kingdom of God –

God's eternal and heavenly rule – once demonstrated to us in time and space in Christ's life, death and resurrection.

Sabbath

Between Heaven and Hell Sermon No 7

Dr Simon Perry

10th June, 2012

This term we've been looking at heaven and earth and hell. So this evening's attempt to conclude the series, feels like an attempt to summarise life, the universe and everything.

Perhaps the way to draw together the varying threads of this terms sermons on heaven, hell, and earth, are to reflect upon the concept of time. As every good Christian knows, human beings are trapped in time – whereas God is somehow out there, outside time. But I can't help wondering whether, according to Scripture, it is the opposite that is true.

For instance, as the youngest college – we might be tempted to think that our chapel is simply a modern construction compared to most of the others. But – there are elements of our chapel that vastly pre-date every other college. In fact, they pre-date the city of Cambridge, the kingdom of England, and in fact – human existence. The fossils worked into the stone in our floor and altar speak of a pre-existence we can barely get our heads around.

And having recently dragged my kids around the Sedgwick Museum in Cambridge, the same cabinet held a fossilised fish 300 million years old, and another that was a mere 200 million years old: sharing the same 1950s cabinet as we imagine them to have shared the same stretch of water – even if they lived a hundred million years apart. And yet, standing outside the cabinet, felt like standing outside time. To my children, the hundreds of millions of years that predate human existence, are comparable in length of time, to the era known as the Tudor Period... There is the sense in which – from the perspective of the modern era, it is we who stand outside time. A proper sense of perspective leaves Robinson chapel in the same era as Kings College chapel.

Of course, that doesn't necessarily make us immortal. According to the Bible we are descended from Adam – and it was a former chancellor of this very university, Sir John Lightfoot, who – through his painstaking and meticulous work, calculated that "heaven and earth, centre and circumference, were created all together, in the same instant, and clouds full of water," and that "this work took place and man was created by the Trinity on October 23, 4004 B.C., at nine o'clock in the morning."

Wouldn't you love to know what Adam was up to at about half ten? Well, according to Genesis, by lunch time he hadn't even got round to naming the animals – because the very first day that Adam saw, was the Sabbath. And from the Scriptural perspective, Sabbath is not simply a liturgical coffee break. It is an invitation to enter into time – in fact, one Rabbi has called the Sabbath a 'Palace in time', a palace into which God invites people.

Sabbath is a Hebrew verb that simply means, stop! In fact, the Sabbath command is smuggled into the psalm that we read: cease striving, and know that I am God: the word cease, is the Hebrew verb for Sabbath: Stop faffing, we might say, and know that I am God...

The reading from Hebrews echoes this concern: God set aside a certain day, calling it 'Today' - the Sabbath is a palace in time, an invitation to enter into the time that God has for us, to step off the hyperactive whirligig, merry-go-round – to dare to stop, and enter the time that God has for us.

This is why Sabbath is woven into Adam's experience of creation. It is not that God was tired, so wanted to take a break. Sabbath is not something you do at the end of a busy week, so you can recharge your batteries for the coming week. Nor has it got anything to do with shops being closed on a Sunday. Sabbath is the call to stop, and to be re-oriented within the purposes of God – and in a hyper-active, non-stop, high-tech, high-speed, carrot-and-stick existence, Sabbath is the call to stop – and to enter into the time in which God himself has offered to meet us.

I used to have a car that was the same age as me. And I remember one day, I drove my vehicular equipage to a little village in Somerset to go into church: as I entered the village, I depressed the deceleratrix, parked the car, applied the hand brake, took the key out of the ignition, locked it and walked away. And as I was walking away, there was something odd about it... I turned round, and the engine was still running. And I had the ignition key in my hand. I had to get back in and stall it to turn the engine off. That, for me, is precisely the modern human condition – that even when we stop to rest and relax, the engine is still running. We are still plugged in to a hyper-active world, where a million distractions invade our space, even when we think we are resting. Not only because we have almost evolved into cyborgs, so that our lap tops and mac books and mobile phones, would need to be surgically removed from most of us. But because we live in a technological culture that has programmed us not to stop and think and reflect.

The only time that happens, for many people, is when they face some kind of a crisis. When my oldest son was learning to ride his bike, he hadn't learned how to stop. I lined him up at the end of the drive and explained the brakes. Pull that lever, bike stops. (Nods). So you understand how to stop. (nods) Right – off you go... So three year old Willem pedals with all the energy of a Saturn 5 rocket wired up to a food blender – building to terminal velocity before ploughing straight into the back of my Peugeot 305. And from the mushroom cloud of carnage, mangled bicycle and grazed limbs, there emerged a big smile: "that's how I stop!" In my line of work, I have spent far too much time with people who only learned how to stop, and think and reflect, when they had hit some crisis – the loss of a job, the death of a family member, the end of a relationship.

What has all this got to do with a series on heaven above and hell below and earth in the middle? Apart from the fact that these realities, as they are conceived by most people, have more to do with Greek philosophy than with the writings of Scripture – Sabbath, is the point at which we take our true bearings in the universe, where we find our place inside the time that God has called us to inhabit. This is a theme which has surfaced one way or another, with each of this term's preachers.

Professor Kirkpatrick spoke about Dante's view of purgatory: and the here and now of our "purgatorial in-betweenness," as we seek to find our bearings in the universe: that is a call to Sabbath.

Dr Trudgill, spoke of a God of the soil, who stoops to the earth to get his hands dirty with human beings. And the appreciation that even something as basic and dirty as soil, is a precious gift that speaks of our treasured place in the universe.

Professor Hooker spoke on Ascension Sunday, of Jesus Ascending into heaven. But heaven, not necessarily as the eternal resting place of those with a terminal excess of virtue; but heaven as the here and now – where the Lord of Space and Time meets us in the here and now. That is Sabbath celebration:

And Catherine Mcfie, who spoke last week, spoke about the dual dimension of doing God's will here on earth: that there is a cosmic scope to our down to earth action, drawing heaven and earth together in the here and now of the life of discipleship. That is Sabbath celebration.

Scripture, actually, has very little to say about heaven or hell. It has a lot to say about resurrection. It is no coincidence, that the resurrection of Jesus is all about the Sabbath day: Jesus entered the tomb the evening before the Sabbath. At dawn, on the day following the Sabbath – the stone has been rolled away and the body has gone. The event that lies at the heart of the Christian faith is an event that took place on the Sabbath. It is by entering the Sabbath, according to scripture, that we see and feel and become a part of what God is doing on the earth. It is by entering Sabbath that we find our place in the universe – by genuinely learning what it means to stop.

It has little to do with having a May week break now that exams are over – although, reading the reports from the Porters Lodge this week seem to demonstrate, that not many have chosen to celebrate the end of their exams with a period of peace and restful tranquillity...

But to celebrate the Sabbath, is to enter into the purpose that God has for us, to have a genuine sense of our place within the created order. The fossils beneath our feet in this chapel, draw our attention again to the lives that we have lasting no longer than the blink of an eye – but

in this tiny moment, we might just find eternity;

in this tiny little corner of time and space, we might just encounter the God of heaven and earth;

in this monstrously insignificant life that we live, God has promised to invest himself.

Sabbath – is the invitation to meet this God.