

Sunday 20th March 2022 – ‘The Hope of Heaven’ (Ephesians 1:7-14, Matthew 6:9-13)

I wonder how you picture heaven? The old cliché is harps and clouds. If you Google it, you'll find lots of images of empty sky and bright light bursting through the atmosphere. Some of them will have steps leading up to glory and even the odd pearly gate or two. You'll also get links to the famous paintings of heaven, like Michelangelo or Hieronymus Bosch, which fill our minds with images of the righteous floating up to the throne. Perhaps you've got a song in your head: there are hundreds of pop songs with 'heaven' in the title. I grew up with Belinda Carlisle telling me that heaven was a place on earth – which sounds quite appealing!

As I was preparing for this talk, I read some of the stories of people who have clinically died, or had near death experiences, and come back. We have to be cautious in interpreting these stories, but what's interesting is that pretty much of all of them struggle to articulate the wonder of what they saw, but, accepting the limitations of our human language, they all talked about light, vibrant colour, peace, innocence, and a deep sense of being loved. And they were all blown away by it.

So what is heaven really like? What is our 'hope of heaven'? The honest answer is that we don't *exactly* know. At some level, the glory of heaven is beyond description: we are dealing with the deep things of God here, so we're going to have to do our best with things that transcend our limited minds. But that doesn't mean we can't say anything, there's plenty of great things we *can* say: so let's piece things together bit by bit...

First, heaven is where God lives. That might sound obvious, but it's easy to forget that. It's not just another earth, somewhere else: it's a home, the home of God. **Second the bible uses heaven in three different dimensions:** the Jewish understanding of the heavens encompassed the air around us (the first level), then the atmosphere/clouds/sky (the second level), and the bit beyond that is what they called the 'third heaven' (St Paul uses this phrase too in the New Testament) – which is the bit we usually refer to as 'heaven'. So in our gospel reading, how Jesus actually introduces the Lord's Prayer is: 'Father of us, the one in the heavens' (plural). In other words, it's not just that God is 'up there' in the 'third heaven', he's also close to us, right here.

Third, whenever the bible describes heaven it hits the same issues that those people who had near death experiences and visions of heaven also encounter – **words run out!** It's so awesome, so amazing, it's too wonderful to describe adequately. So we get a sense of beauty, of peace, of light, of joy, of love. We also find it described in pictures: a banquet, a wedding celebration, a mountain rich with nature and splendour. The end of Revelation describes it as a jewelled city: so we can conclude that it will have both the beauty of creation and also of construction. Definitely not an urban jungle, but not devoid of things which are made rather than grown.

Finally, it's a place which God wants to fill with as many people as possible. We were made to be with God for ever, and through Christ this becomes a reality for us. God doesn't let us grudgingly into his home – it's what we were always meant for! Which is good news, and why the church continues to share the good news of God's love wherever it can.

So far, so good. But there are two big questions which we won't be able to resolve this side of the grave. The first is timing: when we die, do we go straight to heaven or wait until the Day of Judgement at the end of time? On the one hand, Jesus says to the thief on Good Friday:

‘today you will be with me in paradise;’ on the other, most of the New Testament references are pretty clear that we don’t enter our eternal home directly till after Jesus has come again. How do we deal with this? What we can say is that for each of us, the ‘gap’ won’t be obvious: it’s like being asleep – when you wake up, you don’t know how long you’ve been snoozing, the first moment of waking reality comes straight after the last one. ‘Today’ for the thief might not be ‘today’ literally, but rather ‘today’ as he would experience it – and so it will be for us, too.

The second question is even more fundamental, and takes us to the heart of our content today. What actually is our eternal home? We often like to think that we go from earth to somewhere completely separate up in the sky called heaven, but actually the biblical vision is that at the end of time **heaven and earth are both renewed and perfected such that they can join together**: we live in a ‘new heaven and new earth’ (or renewed heaven and earth). Heaven and earth are two separate places presently, but they are also overlapping realities. In its basic terms, God lives in heaven, and humans live on earth – but the whole purpose of God is that humans can live with him, that this separation is overcome.

So **when Jesus comes he brings heaven to earth**: as the song says ‘you didn’t want heaven without us, so Jesus you brought heaven down.’ Jesus brings heavenly love and life and authority to this earth. As we saw last week, all his followers begin to live in eternity now, with the indwelling Spirit representing God’s heavenly downpayment in our lives. This is the message of our passage in Ephesians: the Holy Spirit is described as ‘the deposit which guarantees our inheritance’ (v14). The Spirit is a foretaste of heavenly reality – God’s transforming love in our hearts.

And what is this inheritance: eternal life in union with Jesus! As Paul writes in the same passage: ‘to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ’ (v10). So earth and heaven are reconciled in and through Jesus, and share the divine life of joy, peace and love for ever. But not only after we die: we receive this life in part through God’s gift of the Spirit in our lives now.

In other words, we are not just waiting to fly off to heaven one day, but heaven is breaking into our present circumstances with each passing moment. And this then defines what we pray for, just like Jesus teaches: ‘God, your kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth as in heaven.*’ **Every time we pray this, we’re asking God to bring more of heaven to earth**: in other words, more of the things which define what the rule of God means – compassion, justice, creativity, unity, peace, joy, love, spiritual gifts. This is what heaven is like: and it’d what our final destination will also be like: but this side of the grave our calling is to bring glimpses of eternity here, today.

So, as I close, it’s natural to want to separate heaven from the flawed reality we experience now. Not much of the world feels heavenly at the moment. But if we do that too much, we miss the point: Jesus wants us to be helping him build heaven here: it turns out Belinda Carlile was right after all – heaven could be a place on earth! Jesus’ plan all along has been to unite heaven and earth: and as we follow Jesus, the reality of heaven comes alive in us and is unleashed through us.

So let’s keep looking forward to eternal glory: that’s a good thing, and meant to inspire us. I want to know that where we’re heading is way better than even the best we can experience now. But let’s also claim the reality that our purpose now is, in whatever small ways we can, to be bringers of that divine glory here: how might you do that this week?