



30th October 2016

Luke 24.36-53

John 14.1-3

The Hope of Heaven

Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.

I suspect that most of us are intrigued by the notion of heaven. And if I were Rabbi Lionel Blue I would begin this sermon by telling you a funny story about it. If you've ever listened to him on the radio you'll know that's what he does, tells a jokey tale to make a serious point, all very Rabbinic and all very Jewish.

Well the only funny story I could find about heaven came from the Christian Herald newspaper and here it is: How's your wife? The man asked a friend he hadn't seen for years. She's in heaven, his friend replied. Oh I am sorry he said and then realised that's not what he really meant to say, so added, I mean I'm glad. And that was even worse. So he finally came out with, Well I'm surprised.

When it comes to heaven it's hard to get away from a childhood understanding of a three-decker universe which views heaven as 'up there!' – after all isn't that why church spires point upwards?!

Of course the truth is that heaven simply hasn't got a map reference. We can't point in a particular direction, to fixed co-ordinates in our universe and declare with unequivocal certainty, heaven's over there!

So when I used to visit a senior member of a former congregation and he told me that every night he said his prayers to the man above. I knew exactly who he was talking about, even though in reality God's address and postcode remain a mystery.

And I sense that the writers of the bible didn't know either. They were much less concerned about the physical location of heaven than its spiritual reality. So they too use the 'up there' language. Indeed we probably caught the habit from them in the first place. The nearest literal meaning of the word heaven in the Old Testament is 'The Heights'. So when Psalm 11.4 says the Lord is on his heavenly throne, it's literally talking about the Lord of the Heights.

But who can blame the Old Testament writers; they too were grappling with a mystery, trying their best to describe a world that is promised to us, the world of heaven. As to is it and what is it like - well the Jews were the first to say it's far beyond us, another world, the world of the heights.

In New Testament Greek heaven means just about the same thing as Old Testament Hebrew, you translate it sky or air. So at that profoundly significant moment when Jesus is

baptised in the River Jordan by John St Matthew tells us, in mystical, allegorical language that the heavens opened and a dove flew down and rested on him. Alongside the action there were the words, spoken from heaven, God's voice declaring: You are my beloved Son.

To round it all off there's the Ascension. Jesus goes to the Mount of Olives and there bids farewell to his disciples and they describe the event as Jesus being taken from them, ascending into heaven, going up, and disappearing into the skies.

But remember this is the language of poetry not a formula from science. It's describing in words what none of us have yet experienced in reality.

A few years ago when the Hail Bop comet came passed the earth one Easter, a planeload of astronomers took a specially commissioned night flight from Heathrow just to get a closer look at the comet as it travelled 500 feet up in the sky – it must have been the flight of a lifetime .

Yet no aeroplane we might charter could ever take us to heaven. The bible simply wants to say to us, in the language of poetry, using the genre of imagery: God dwells on high – he is Our Father Who Art in Heaven.

John 14 surely has one of the most comforting and hope filled verses of the bible when it records these words of Jesus: In my Father's house (and for that we might read heaven) are many rooms, if it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you.

It's a biblical promise that informs our faith with hope - heaven will be a place of welcome. It's as if God has prepared a room for us: and that is a picture to treasure all your life. For there's nothing better than arriving at a house or hotel and being greeted by the words: Welcome, let me take you to your room, everything is ready.

That's the essence of John 14, heaven is a place of welcome, rest and wholeness. Jesus said: In my Father's house are many rooms and I'm going to prepare a place for you.

In my first church the Secretary, whilst giving the notices, often used to announce that so and so in the congregation had received their 'home call'. Some newer members, not used to this language of Zion, thought we were announcing the minister's visiting schedule. Of course it was just a rather old fashioned, yet sincere, way of saying one of our friends had died, been called home. And when you think about it such terminology says a lot about what we believe. Heaven is a place of welcome and a place of belonging – ultimately a 'coming home'. And such a view can transform our perception of death and offers us hope.

Well I suppose the 64 million dollar question is: What will heaven be like? We'll look in vain for a detailed biblical description. After all how can you put in words something so totally other as the concept heaven. a

What we have are snippets, mere glimpses.

The Bible suggests heaven will be a place of New Peace.

In the Tsunami Memorial Service from St Paul's a decade ago, Lord Richard Attenborough read those words from Revelation that speak of heaven being a place where there is no more crying. And so when we have lived alongside a friend or relative who has been in constant pain, whose life has been dominated by disease, we sometimes say of their death that they are now at peace, safe in the hands of a loving God.

Alongside this is the idea of a new body – a different sort of existence. These are Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15, that great chapter all about the resurrection: The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable, it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory.

For many folk with an illness, a disfigurement or some physical cross they have to bear, these words of Paul's and this glimpse of heaven will be encouraging. We'll have new, imperishable bodies.

A New Peace and a New Body. I think the bible also says we'll have a New Understanding.

Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 13: Now we see a poor reflection as in a mirror, then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

Once when I was on duty as a Day Chaplain in St Alban's Abbey I got talking to a retired Anglican Priest from America. You bumped into all sorts of people throughout your day there and this was a friendly and stimulating encounter. He told me: I'm a Christian Agnostic you know.

Well at first I'm not sure I did know, the dictionary defines an Agnostic as a person who believes that nothing is known, or can be known, of the existence or nature of God, or of anything beyond material phenomena.

So he wasn't really a true agnostic at all because it was clear he had a deep belief in God. No, he was using the term more loosely and saying that when it came to many things about his belief he still had questions. When I preach, he said, I used to tell my congregation it could mean this or that, we'll just have to wait and see what the answer is when we get to heaven.

I understood what he was saying and respected his integrity. We had a lovely chat; in fact as I wondered about the Abbey that afternoon as if from nowhere he'd jump out from behind a pillar for yet another talk!

Perhaps over the years I've become something of a Christian Agnostic too – as I find myself increasingly willing to live with the questions rather than define faith as having all the answers. St Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 13 ring true with me as he says: Now I know in part, then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

And finally – Heaven is a place of New Worship.

After all this is the dwelling place of God.

St John the Divine, in Revelation pictures heaven this way in chapter 21: And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: Now the dwelling place of God is with men and women, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them.

Visions of heaven like those found in Isaiah and Revelation often have worship at the centre. It's described as a place of loud and joyful singing. Day and night thanksgiving is offered up to the Lamb upon The Throne.

I love one definition of liturgy that I came across in my college days. Liturgy is just the worship of the people, the prayers, hymns and songs that we use together. One writer said liturgy was simply: playing at heaven.

Perhaps you have sometimes felt you've glimpsed heaven during a time of worship. We can all be deeply moved by the words that we sing, we can look out during a walk on the hills and feel a lump in our throat saying this is so beautiful we just want to praise the God of heaven. Worship seems to be part of what's in store for us in the world to come.

I also so appreciate that those who have gone before us are already worshipping God in heaven and that our worship somehow – in a profoundly mysterious and reassuring way – combines with theirs. So as we gather here we also gather with them, to sing our alleluias and be joined together as The Church Militant and Triumphant, on earth and in heaven, worshipping the God who binds us together

So there we are, just a few of the things the bible says about that place called heaven. New peace, new bodies, new understanding and new worship.

When Michael Folls, the British born astronaut was about to go up and live for 6 months on the Mere Space Station he was asked what he'd do in his spare time once he was rocketed up into the heavens. He said: I would just like to spend it looking out of the window!

In the end he was busier than he'd anticipated and had very little time for stargazing.

And I'm sure that when it comes to it, for all of us heaven will be very different from what we're anticipating.

In this season of All Souls and All Saints we remember those no longer with us but still, we believe, held in God's hands upon another shore and our minds turn to heaven.

As Easter Morning people who hold that death is not the end we believe our future is in the nearer presence of a loving God – and that belief is grounded not in a flimsy dream but in those words of our Saviour, words of promise and of hope for he once said: Let not your hearts be troubled for I go to prepare a place for you.

May it be so, in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen