

Heaven/Hell

Discovering or recovering our oneness with God [by gift: *Father that they all may be one...Jn.17.21.*] has, traditionally, been called heaven. Its loss called hell. Only my true self [*the face I had before I was born*] - which I make real by the choices I make, shaping my identity, knows that heaven is *now*; its loss is hell.

To find the one way is to see the whole picture, not just me and my interests [*the oft said "I'm not interested" indicates my inability to see*] but seeing and embracing the panorama of Creation, is called *Kingdom-living* - and it begins *now*. This means letting-go of our own smaller kingdoms, which we find hard to do.

Kingdom-living means freely choosing the union offered, here and now. Heaven doesn't have a post-code: *as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be...* Heaven is actually living in union. No one is in heaven without wanting to be there - and all are in heaven as soon as they live in union - with ample room for communion and no room for exclusion.

Perhaps this is what Jesus had in mind when he said: *there are many rooms in my Father's house* - Jn.14.2. If I go to heaven alone, wrapped in my own private worthiness, by definition it is not heaven. The more I exclude, the more hellish and lonely will be my existence. A reminder that as is now, will be... [*as it was in heaven, is now and ever will be...*] - if heaven is now, so will it be.

To see God as doling-out punishment to those who do not love him, is to see a universe where most people end up being more loving than God.

God excludes no one - but allows us to exclude ourselves and others, by respecting our freedom to do so. Our word for this is hell. Because of our freedom, hell has to be a logical possibility. Freedom means I can say yes or no.

As with heaven, so with hell, no one is in hell unless by free choice for loneliness and separation. What is it that I *desire* with all my heart? *The Church has never declared a single person to be in hell*].

Jesus' love was unconditional, freely given to all who asked. Jesus asks us to forgive even enemies, because that is what God is ever doing: *Follow God's example, therefore, as dearly loved children and walk in the way of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God* - Eph.5.1.

Life manifests diversity, and moves towards union in that diversity. As in the Trinity - union is not division, but diversity respected and manifestly one.

Our selfish self prefers meritocracy - a world of winners and losers rather than a graced world where merit and worthiness have no meaning. Heaven is the rediscovering of the world of happy childhood; but now informed by the maturing experiences of love, friendship and compassion. The wider the horizon,

the greater the inclusivity. If God could be all inclusive, why not me? First comes the setting aside *either/or* living in favour of *both/and*.

The God I have become aware of during my lifetime is now an experience of a God in whom there is always something more.

An atheist philosopher once famously stated that "Hell is other people." At the end of one of his books, Pope Benedict XVI plays on this famous saying but says the exact opposite. According to Pope Benedict, "Heaven is other people."

Heaven is not a place with harps and clouds and angels. It is a way of life, full of people, who have finally learned how to treat people like people. In heaven, the misunderstanding and confusion, the bad habits and selfishness that make life messy and make it hard to live together in peace, are no more.

But let us look a little closer. If heaven is not about clouds and harps, but about living in love with one another, then heaven is not just something that happens when you die. It is something that starts right here, in this life. When Jesus told people "*You are not far from the Kingdom of heaven,*" he did not mean, "*Buy insurance, your time is almost up.*" No, he meant "*You understand how to enjoy living with other people.*"

Heaven starts here, whenever people get over themselves enough to reach out to one another in love; when they can sacrifice what seems advantageous to them at the time, to care for another; when they can step back and know that the cheating and lying and illness that plague us are not what define our existence, however much they may shape it.

In fact, anything we know about the afterlife starts with what we know about this life. And if the afterlife is good, it is because it is the continuation and perfection of what is good here and now.