

Heaven

Heaven! What can we say about heaven? A parishioner recently wrote in this question:

Being a ‘Doubting Thomas’ I have always struggled with the ‘idea of heaven’ a place for souls after this life.

No one has ever come back from there to tell us.

I do know it was a comfort when certain family members died – to think of a reunion of ‘grampy and grammy’.

Thanks for this question! There is not an easy or definitive answer! As our parishioner says, ‘No one has ever come back to tell us about heaven.’ So let’s start out by saying ‘heaven’ is a mystery, something about which we can only speculate. I have done some digging around about heaven. I think I have learned something which I will share with you.

This is Mothers Day. On this day some of us think about the mothers or grandmothers or mother figures we have loved, who have passed through that mysterious veil. We wonder whether they watch us, guide us even. We wonder whether they are reunited with their loved ones who have passed on. Much as we would like to think so, we don’t really know! God is good and God loves us. That we do know, and following on from that, we can be assured that what lies beyond for us is good.

But some of our notions of heaven might need to be challenged. I am following closely the work of noted theologian N T Wright. He is English and a Senior Research Fellow at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford University, an Emeritus Professor at University of St Andrews, Aberdeen and the author of over 90 books, He writes that many people believe, there is a heaven and an earth and that human souls once they’ve lived their lives, will ‘go to heaven’ when they die. Would most of us say we believe in “going to heaven when we die”? But the people who believed

in that kind of “heaven” were not the early Christians. That belief came later and really gained ground in the Middle Ages. N T Wright writes “ To understand what the first followers of Jesus believed about what happens after death, we need to read the New Testament in its own world — the world of Jewish hope, of Roman imperialism and of Greek thought.”

Israel’s scriptures had long promised that God would come back in person to dwell with his people for ever. The early Christians picked this up: The Gospel of John begins declaring “The Word became flesh, and dwelt in our midst.” The word for “dwelt” means, “tabernacled,” “pitched his tent” — alluding to the wilderness “tabernacle” in the time of Moses and the Temple built by Solomon. Studying the New Testament historically, in its own world (as opposed to manipulating it to fit with our own time), shows that the first Christians believed not that they would “go to heaven when they died,” but that, in Jesus, God had come to live with them.

That was the lens through which they saw the hope of the world. The book of Revelation ends, not with souls going up to heaven, but with the New Jerusalem coming down to earth, so that “the dwelling of God is with humans.” It’s hard for us to grasp this since so many hymns, prayers and sermons still speak of us “going to heaven.”

What then was the personal hope for Jesus’ followers? They hoped for resurrection — a new and immortal physical body in God’s new creation. But, after death and before that final resurrection, their hope was for a period of blissful rest. “In my father’s house,” Jesus assured his followers, “are many waiting-rooms.” These are not the final destination. They are the temporary resting-place, ahead of the ultimate new creation. But

Jesus also assures us he will be with us there. When someone dies we say ‘May he/she rest in peace and rise in glory.’

Historical study — reading the New Testament in its own world — thus brings surprises that can have an impact on modern Christianity. Perhaps the most important is a new, or rather very old, way of seeing the Christian mission. If the only point is to save souls from the wreck of the world, so they can leave and go to heaven, why bother to make this world a better place? But if God is going to do for the whole creation what he did for Jesus in his resurrection — to bring them back, here on earth — then those who have been rescued by the gospel are called to play a part, right now, in the advance renewal of the world.

N.T. Wright writes “Despite what many people think, within the Christian family and outside it, the point of Christianity isn't ‘to go to heaven when you die.’“The New Testament picks up from the Old the theme that God intends, in the end, to put the whole creation to rights. Earth and heaven were made to overlap with one another, not fitfully, mysteriously, and partially as they do at the moment, but completely, gloriously, and utterly. ... The great drama will end, not with ‘saved souls’ being snatched up into heaven, away from the wicked earth and mortal bodies which have dragged them down into sin, but with the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven to earth, so that ‘the dwelling of God is with humans.’

Revelation assures us that in God’s new heaven and earth, his home is among mortals...that He will dwell with us...we will be his people. He will wipe every tear from our eyes, death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more. He will make all things new.

But in the end we come back to heaven as mystery...the enigma, the unfathomable. It is beyond our comprehension but

something promised and something to be trusted. What our Lord clearly promises is that we will be with Him. Amen.