

Sermon: Sunday 27 September 2009

Heaven: Part 1 of 3

Today I am going to move into uncharted territory and speak about Heaven. This has been prompted by several events, not only because I was challenged by a parishioner but because, since I began here, there have been several significant funerals of those who have held significant roles amongst us.

It is a strange fact that as a church that believes in the Christian truths, we are so ignorant of that place which Jesus not only challenges us to create here on earth, but assures us of inheritance. The fact is (and I believe this to be a universal definition) that Heaven is simply where God is. We can attempt to dress it up in many ways but for most of us Heaven exists in our minds – probably because we do not have the ability to think beyond our human experience. Heaven could well be in the arms of your most special friend, visiting your favourite country, eating your favourite food, drinking your favourite wine or simply relaxing in the sun. The closest we come to understanding Heaven is the sum total of our best and most special occasions. But in 1 Corinthians, Paul tells us it is even better than that!

There is a clear difference between the Heaven of the Hebrews and a Heaven of the Christians. It would be fair to say that Jesus redefined Heaven for us. When we look back to Genesis, we find perfect Adam and Eve in a perfect Garden without sin. That could well be Heaven, if weren't for the fact that Evil, in the shape of a serpent, was there. Heaven is better than Eden!

The Hebrews also believed that only exceptional humans would get there and the notion of several levels of Heaven was common, in effect the upper level being "Paradise". What is clear in our New Testament is that Heaven is the dwelling place of God and Paul tells us in Philippians that to "die is to be with Christ" – that Heaven indeed is a state of future bliss.

The final book of the Bible (not unexpectedly, part of the Apocrypha which talks about end times) gives us a graphic description of Heaven. Revelation 21 tells us that:

- God will wipe away every tear from their eyes
- There will be no more death, mourning or crying in pain
- The old order has passed away
- Christ is making all things new
- I will provide drink for the thirsty
- I will be your God and you my son
- The cowardly, the vile, the murderous, the sexually immoral, those who practise magic acts, worship idols and are liars – they will find place in a fiery lake of burning sulphur!
- The Holy city will shine like a precious jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal, with 12 gates, one for each of Israel's tribes and the foundations of the city will be inscribed with the names of the 12 Apostles.

- There will be no darkness because the light of the Lamb (Christ) will be its illumination

2 Corinthians tells us that the “true righteous will find a home in Heaven” and John 14 assures of our dwelling where God is, because he will take us there.

A question I am often asked is if we can expect to meet loved ones who have predeceased us. Heaven will not be a lonely place! The writer of 1 Thessalonians tells us that we will meet other dead in that place – that speaks of reuniting us with loved ones: 1 Peter talks about Eternal Inheritance. This will be final home for us where, as Revelation tells us, God’s saints will reign where, in the words of St Matthew, there will be no decay, no theft, we will not grow old.

But perhaps the most graphic illustrations of Heaven come from Daniel, Ezekiel and Paul who each saw Heaven in a vision and state that human words cannot describe Heaven, that it had an alarming impact on those who saw it – that no eye has seen nor ear heard nor mind conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.

Wow! Heaven sounds like a pretty amazing place. In the last few minutes, what strikes me is that I have just described my hopes for the world. As a people of God, isn’t this the kind of place we want our kids to grow up in, ourselves to live in and our elderly to find rest in?

As a Christian people, our responsibility is to make our world fit for God to want to rule over it. And at the moment, it’s wanting!

Two weeks ago we increased our church numbers by over 50% for the day on Back to Church Sunday. And the question is – exactly how hard was it for us to bring someone along? What was their response after the service? I can only gauge response by having to “fight” my way into the lounge for morning tea, as so many had stayed – and for the duration of those refreshments. I believe we all have a willingness to want to make our world a better, safer and more secure place in which to live. If, indeed, Heaven is the sum total of our best experiences, we are actually closer than we think. We as a Christian people have not begun a journey; we are continuing it and in Christ this is a destination we can be assured of reaching.