

Homily for Parishes in the Western Region without clergy

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 26th May 2019, Easter 6

Readings: **Acts 16:9-15**

Revelation 21:10-14, 21:22-22:5

Psalm 67

John 14:23-29

I was interviewed last week by some fantastic people creating Christian education videos. Their questions were not the expected ones about faith and social justice, but asked rather what I thought about ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’! Did I believe in such places, where were they, and what might they look like?

I don’t know where your mind goes when you hear those names, but mine goes initially to Michelangelo’s massive painting in the Sistine Chapel. The feet of God are seen way up high, seated on a throne beyond the clouds; a muscular Jesus is standing as the judge who is sending some souls up, and some souls down; and an army of demons are doing terrible things to those who go down to a very hot place below the earth!

As ancient peoples looked at light shafting through the clouds, they understandably concluded that the gods lived there. So, mountains that were sometimes covered with cloud were expected to be places of divine encounter. In our faith we can think of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, or Jesus transfigured before his friends on an unknown high mountain.

Similarly when ancient peoples saw molten lava bubbling, and witnessed volcanic eruptions, it is not too hard to understand why they imagined ‘hell’ as a fiery place of death and destruction.

However, through centuries of scientific work we now understand the world very differently to those ancient peoples. We have drilled deep down into the earth and have scanned through to a molten core without finding any demons. And, we have some appreciation of how mountains have formed, and continue to form, as tectonic plates push inexorably against one another.

And heaven was not found when the first astronauts went up into space. They did not find the heavenly throne room of God that had been described by the religious imagination of ancient peoples, but instead found the vastness of space. On Christmas Eve 1968, just over fifty years ago, humanity was given a new perspective when the Apollo 8 mission photographed earth rising over the horizon of the moon. Jim Lovell, one of the first three astronauts to see this, claims that this forever changed him. He went so far as to suggest that, “You go to heaven when you’re born!”

I disagree with Jim Lovell because there are plenty of terrible places and situations on earth that could not be understood as anyone’s ‘heaven’. But, if we agree that heaven is not a geographical place described by an ancient religious imagination – how might we understand it differently?

My hunch is that we might helpfully begin by using the language of relationship and love. That maybe part of what ‘heaven’ is, is to be in perfect relationship and communion with God. And, that being in hell is to have no relationship or communion with God. In the light of your own experience and reading I wonder what you think about this??

Some people think that the purpose of Christian faith is to ensure that people get to a place called ‘heaven’ after we die. Further, that faith in Jesus is the only certain way to achieve this. Remember Paul’s words in

his letter to the Romans in which he suggests that ‘...if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.’ (Romans 10:9).

Interestingly, when Jesus is remembered talking about what happens after we die he seems to use different criteria to Paul! In the twenty fifth chapter of Matthew, Jesus is remembered saying that that the peoples of all nations would not be judged on the basis of their belief, but rather by the way they responded to human need. If there had been compassionate and practical response to those who were hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, or strange... people would find God’s approval; but, if there was no response... there would be eternal punishment (Matthew 25:31-46).

But, if we just think in terms of post mortal accountability then we’re stuck in the perception that the main game of Christian faith is what happens after we die! I love the verse in John’s Gospel which remembers Jesus saying that he came for us to ‘*have life, and have it abundantly.*’ (John 10:10). Somehow, this suggests that in this life, not just the next one, we find meaning, purpose, and peace through relationship with Christ and through openness to God’s Spirit. We can get glimpses of ‘heaven’ right here and now when we have a deep sense that we are known, we are deeply loved, and we are in tune... with the God who makes everything possible.

The opening verses of today’s Psalm (Psalm 67) seem to speak from this place because they are a prayer of blessing for all people. They pray, “*May God be gracious to us and bless us: and make his face to shine upon us...*” and if it stopped there then we would just want to have close relationship with God, and keep the joy and gift of this to ourselves.

But, the Psalm continues, “*That your ways may be known on earth: your liberating power among all nations.*” We ask to be blessed by God, not just for our own good but so that we can be a blessing to others, and that our lives can give witness to faith we have.

The third verse suggests that living God-centred lives brings a peace that no other focus can give because it requests, “*Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.*”

In our living this week, let us seek to be generous and creative because we understand these to be essential to the nature of God. And, let us seek to be compassionate in our everyday living trusting that the God who loves all, will take care of whatever happens next.

Let’s pray...

God of grace and love, we give thanks for the mystery and gift of our lives, and ask your blessing on all the peoples of the world. We pray in the name of the one who calls us to follow, Jesus the risen Christ. Amen.