

St Mary Abbots, Trinity 8

Genesis 15:1-6, Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16 and Luke 12:23-40

Father Christopher.

Do any of you know when you are going to die? I thought not. In medieval Europe the risk of not being prepared for a good death was just about the most terrifying thing imaginable – hence all of those doom paintings in parish churches, so that every Sunday you would have been confronted by the prospect of either a beatific heaven or a gruesome hell. And the chance to prepare well for death – making your confession, receiving absolution, anointing, and communion – the last rites – was what every Christian wished for more than anything in this life. Because dying ‘unshriven’, as it was put, was the one sure fire way to end up in hell.

Most of us now believe that God’s grace is probably bigger than the lottery of whether you happen to have been in a state of grace at the moment of your death or not; it is not after all your fault if you are hit by a bus without having first booked in to see a priest. God must surely somehow take into account more than just whether you happen to have made your confession and received forgiveness at the precise second you die. And that’s if you believe in hell at all – hell has for many come to be understood as more of a state of being away from the presence of God, rather than a place where you burn forever.

For others - a view I think I probably come closest to though, who knows? - surely if we are all created by God, we must somehow end up back with Him. And this tendency, which it is hard not at least to *want* to believe, is where I think the Catholic idea of purgatory comes from – the belief that even if you haven’t repented before your death, surely God gives you another chance, somehow, after your death.

There are passages of the bible that seem to support each of these different views, but ultimately we cannot of course know until we get there ourselves.

Our readings today I think address the question of the role the afterlife plays in our faith during our lifetime. Much seems to indicate that we should believe because of the promise of what we will receive after we die, or at the Second Coming of Christ. That second isn’t a very fashionable doctrine either.

‘You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.’

As it is put in the letter to the Hebrews, regarding those who speak of being *‘strangers and foreigners on earth ... seeking a homeland’*, *‘they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.’*

Now, whatever you think about heaven or hell, or about the Second Coming, the idea of heaven being a **reward** for faith is also rather unfashionable, or hard to digest, and for another reason. **Authenticity** is one of the personal qualities which our age seems to place particular value on, and if you only believe – if you only have faith – because of something you are promised, or think you are going to get as a result, then how can it be authentic? Being *bribed* into faith by a promise of something to be gained in return, or because of the **threat** that follows if you don’t believe, to put it more negatively, feels inauthentic, and at best too transactional.

In any event, how can you just decide to believe because you think it’s best for you – take the leap of faith – if you don’t just believe deep down because you think the message of Jesus, and the God He reveals in His living, dying and rising again, is true for its own sake?

Someone recently made me think about these things by asking me if I would continue to work as a priest if I stopped believing. The question rather stumped me; and it stumped me because I simply couldn’t imagine stopping believing. Now this is not I think because my faith is so deep and authentic, and because I’m such a holy person, that I cannot imagine life without Jesus. I’m not, for

example, very good at praying when on holiday – in some way I can imagine getting out of the holy habits that your life of necessity revolves around as a priest, which rather forces me to pray every day, whether I like it, or feel like it, or not.

But I couldn't imagine it, because I realised that over the years my whole world view, my outlook and perspective, has become shaped around my faith. Not just all the obvious doctrines of the faith, but my belief in the power of mercy and forgiveness; my belief in the power of weakness and vulnerability; my belief in the power and presence of the Cross in everyday life, in the pain people talk to me of suffering day by day as I meet them here in this place; and in its transformation, through the resurrection of Christ.

All of these things are not a leap of faith to believe in the seemingly impossible by some sort of trick of the imagination, as people without faith seem to imagine. They are a way of looking at the world that I cannot imagine doing without, centred on and rooted in the person of Jesus Christ.

But how does this fit with some of the language around our gospel reading for today, which sounds as though it is instead based on the threat of your life ending and Jesus returning with no notice, and you going to hell?

Well, in the first instance, I think we need to be straightforward in tackling head-on the context, in which people thought Jesus would return any day - during the lifetime of some of His disciples indeed. He did not do so, and has not to this day – which makes us have to work hard on what the promise of His Second Coming means. But it has also led later biblical writers to think that perhaps we receive the rewards of our faith in this life. Perhaps we can be with God and experience heaven before we die.

If we are strangers and pilgrims on earth, perhaps we can at the same time in our prayer be united with God, and experience that promised homeland while going about our ordinary lives. Perhaps that is what 'in the world, but not of the world' means. And, let me be honest with you, my view on precisely what salvation means has shifted on this one.

I think I used to take the very metaphorical view, and believe that the idea of the afterlife should make very little difference to us – after all it seemed unimaginably far away in the future. It is perhaps no accident that as I've got a bit older the context of eternity feels more relevant. I know that I can only ever **glimpse** eternity and the joys of heaven and being with God in this life – or '*see through a glass darkly*' as St Paul put it.

And yet, nor do I think that we only believe and strive to conform ourselves to Christ in this life for the sake of what comes after. I do not like the more transactional understanding, much as that has influenced the development of Christianity, particularly in medieval times.

I think there is a middle path. A path in which we draw closer to Christ and seek to live in the light of God because we believe that it is **right** – our duty and our joy as the liturgy puts it; but also because we see our life and whole of existence *within* the context of eternity. We live very much in our time and place, but conscious that that is not all there is.

Somewhat paradoxically, we believe that if we live as though we believe that we are strangers and pilgrims in this life, seeking a homeland which we know we will never reach in this life, we will both live a more fulfilling life on this side of the grave – if not an easier one; and also, in His grace, in the fulness of eternity, reach that better country, that heavenly one, that city which He has prepared for us. Which is my prayer for all of us. Amen