

St Peter & St Paul 22 May 2011

Loving Father, as we study your word this morning help us to understand and help us to believe. In Jesus name, AMEN

Well -good morning! So good to see you -really, really good -we are all still here!

It is a tad weird to be preaching about life after death on May 22nd 2011 – lets try not to be too cruel -poor old Mr Camping is probably doing a good enough job of beating himself up all by himself.

If I were to ask you, ‘what was your best holiday ever?’ I wonder what you’d answer? For many of you I guess it would be a nostalgic exercise. Holidays on the beach as a child, visits to family in other parts of the country. Maybe your first trip abroad -real French cheese when till then it was cheddar or nothing!

As you know I’ve been to India and Israel recently –to me they had been kind of fantasy places. If anyone mentioned them I would sigh and say ‘Oh I’d **love** to go there one day.’ And then I did. They turned out to be a real places, not a dream. Now when I think about India, or Israel I know they really exists.

Timbuktu on the other hand. Well, when we were naughty as little girls - we were a family of three girls -my Dad used to tell us that if we didn’t behave he’d send us to Timbuktu. It sounded exotic and far, far away - and in a kind of way I never thought it really existed. It just had this role of being the place you were sent to when you were misbehaving. To be honest I’m not that sure about it even now.

My point is.....well -Timbuktu does actually exist. It had a real and relevant role in my childhood as a symbolic place -but it also does exist, its real, and you could go and visit it.

And that’s our dilemma with heaven isn’t it?

When push comes to shove, when we are forced into a corner by life. Does heaven really exist or is it a sort of helpful symbol which we hold on to help us cope with the desperate pit of grief and loneliness? The huge funeral we has last week for Dr MacIntyre -well I wonder what his friends and colleagues would make of that heaven dynamic -one which was very powerfully there.

In philosophical terms you would ask the question are you a realist or an anti-realist?

A realist believes that there is something real, something which corresponds to the claim you are making. An anti-realist on the other

hand thinks that what makes a statement true is whether it forms a coherent part of a particular form or code of life. In other words truth for them is relative, not absolute.

Let me give you a simple example. Take the statement **‘the world is flat’**

A realist will say ‘we used to believe the world was flat, but we were mistaken. Through the power of science we now know that the world is round (ish).

The anti-realist however will say ‘We used to think that the world was flat, this was true at the time because that belief formed an integral part of the way the world was then seen.

It was once true, but is so no longer.’

Now this boils down to a rather fundamental difference in the way in which we do our Christian thinking. And, in the light of this morning’s reading from John a crucial difference in the way in which we think about heaven.

These famous verses from John 14 -which begins ‘do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me -and go through to ‘I am the way, the truth and the light, no one comes to the father except through me.’ -those verses are read at funeral services many times a day throughout the country. The reason they are chosen is of course because they offer a deep comfort. They tell us that by putting our faith, our trust in Jesus, we will join him after death, in heaven.

It is, I hope you will agree, rather important for us to decide if we are realists or anti-realist about this heaven which Jesus is inviting us to.

So the question is, is there actually some state of existence which follows on from death to which we have given the name ‘heaven’? It may be that we are not able to comprehend how that might be, maybe modern science can disprove the possibility of any such state on the basis of the knowledge that we have thus far, but nonetheless we believe the words of Jesus, that such a state of being really, actually exists.

Or is heaven a part of the tapestry of Christian faith which, like the earth being flat, was true for the people writing the bible, which was part of

how their culture made sense of life and death, but which we now can see, with the insight of modern physics, is a practical impossibility, and becomes a metaphor for the fact that though individuals die, yet human life continues.

It may be that you don't care. You may feel, like many other people that it is the way that you live your life now that is important, and that living a good life -generous, loving, moral -that that sort of life has within it its own rewards. As you live like that so you grow and the more you are contented and at peace. Whether there is, or is not life after death is not in any way crucial.

There is a lot going for such a philosophy, and it is indeed true that being a good person has many inherent rewards.

But I believe that it is not enough.

There are two basic reasons for this. A personal one, and a theological one.

Firstly, there will come a time in all our lives when it will feel an incredibly urgent need to know. Many of you here will already have experienced it. It may occur when you contemplate your own death, or it may be when you have to learn to live with the fact of the death of some one you have loved most dearly.

For me, that moment came at the death of my father. All my life I guess I have sort of believed in heaven. Imagining what it might be like was a kind of dinner time game in our family. We would discuss whether you went on changing and developing in heaven. Whether there would be work to do. Whether if you climbed a mountain you would feel pain in your muscles, feel out of breath, - was the pain intrinsic to the sense of achievement when you got to the top. Would you be able to compose music as good as Mozart?

I had a sort of quiet confidence that, although it must, of necessity be beyond our powers of comprehension, never the less it was there. But it was never a burning, urgent question.

Then, suddenly, my dad died. And I used to go out into the garden and stand by the lovely silver birch trees in the garden and cry, and I'd think 'what if its not true after all?' 'what if we made it up to comfort each other at moments like this' 'what if I just have to face up to the fact that who he was existed in that body, and that body is dead and he really is gone, stopped, for ever?'

This leads us on to the theological part: because if you take heaven out of the equation it all starts to unravel. The only way there can be no heaven is if there was no resurrection. If Jesus did not actually rise from the dead, if the hundreds of people who saw him were all liars, if the gospels in fact stop at the crucifixion, then there would be no reason to believe in heaven. If then the crucifixion was the end, then the power of death proved to be greater than the power of Jesus love for us, and since God - who is love - is that of which nothing greater can be conceived, it follows that Jesus was not God. So...why bother believing in him. He has no power to forgive us, no power to heal us, and of course, no power to offer us eternal life.

So, I hope by now you can see that at the personal and at the theological level we have reached a crucial place.

It is at this crucial place that Jesus himself meets us. No more ideas, no more theories, no more questions. This is why these words are indeed so comforting. Jesus is sitting with his friends. They are sharing the Passover meal, and he has been talking about his death. There is a heavy feeling, a cloud, like the grief that you experience when you know the end is coming. Then, with such love and compassion Jesus says to them 'Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust in me.'

Then he goes on to explain that he is going to prepare a place for them, for us. We will be where he is.

The words must have been yes, comforting, but also mysterious to them at the time.

We now know the story. A few hours later Jesus died. Up till then it was not possible for us to be with him, with God because our failure, our rejection of God, our sin, had separated us from God. But through his dying came forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Then came Easter morning. We can't describe where he had been, we don't know where he is now, but because of the truth of Easter we can know that he once was dead and now he is alive. His promise is that it will be like that for us, and we can believe it because his resurrection shows that his power as God, his power of love for us is greater than the power of death.

Yes! We all need faith. There is no watertight scientific proof. But our faith is rooted in the very solid truth of the resurrection, and in the equally solid truth that we can know Jesus in our lives now, day by day.

There are so many ways in which we can encounter the real living Jesus, but this morning we have the opportunity of meeting him as we kneel at the communion table. Taking the signs of his love for us into ourselves and trusting that as Jesus death was followed by his resurrection, so will our own death be followed by resurrection.

So –yes -I believe in the resurrection -but what or where heaven might be is a step further. Is heaven actually somewhere else? We don't really have time for this now -but Jesus didn't actually teach about some distant 'heaven' -what he taught about was this world –and then the world -the real world to come.

I like this concept so much: that God doesn't abandon his world, but that a new day and new age a new era was coming. –Isaiah pointed to a day 'when the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.' The Jews didn't talk about a future life somewhere else, because they anticipated a coming day when the world would be restored, renewed and redeemed and there would be peace on earth.

Sometimes when Jesus talks about heaven he simply means God. –As when he talks about people sinning against heaven.

He consistently affirms heaven as a real place, space, dimension of God's creation -a place where things are the way God intends them to be -on

earth as in heaven -maybe a day when earth and heaven will be the same place?

Now might this have a living reality – be more than hopeful dream?

Jesus teaches us to pursue the life of heaven now and also then, anticipating the day when heaven and earth are one.

If you, like Mr Camping, believe that you are going to leave and evacuate to somewhere else -then why do anything about this world?

But if you believe that a time is coming when things are on earth as they currently are in heaven then what you do, and how you live matters:

Honest business,

Redemptive art,

Honourable law,

Sustainable living,

Medicine,

Education,

Making a home,

Tending a garden -

They're all sacred tasks to be done in partnership with God -they will all re-create the world.

Heaven comforts -because all will be well –there will be an end of tears and pain -gold standard promise

Heaven also confronts –are you becoming the sort of person that God can run his reclaimed new world with?

Amen