

## THE “LAST THINGS” - 1

The creed that has been the background to all we've been talking about over the past few months ends with the following two lines: 'I believe...in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting'. These are known as the 'last things'.

We can divide the issues into two groups: those concerning what happens to an individual when he or she dies; and those concerning what will happen to the whole of creation, the entire universe. I will deal with the first group today and the second one in the next lecture. And then comes the end of this series too.

Let us begin with **heaven**. In ancient times, including the time when Jesus was on this earth “heaven” was believed to be a place somewhere far up in the sky. But heaven is not a place in the sense that Grahamstown, for example, is. Heaven is an experience: it is the experience of being totally transformed by love and enjoying an eternity of loving and being loved. We are also accustomed to think of heaven as a reward for being good – an eternal lollipop. There is a genuine sense in which heaven is a reward for a life well lived in love. But it is far more than a reward. It is the experience of the full flowering of the love that was planted in our souls and to which we were reasonably true in our lives. From the moment we are born and have Christ's Spirit of Love dwelling in our hearts, we already have eternal life within us, says Jesus in John's Gospel. Well heaven is but the full flowering of that life - which is simply love.

Unrestricted by the present limitations of the world we live in our love now creates a depth of unity between us that cannot imagine. But our capacity for love in heaven will differ from person to person, depending on the extent to which we developed that capacity in this life. Thus Catholicism believes that everyone will be as happy and fulfilled as they can be in heaven – but the capacities for such love and joy will differ. And since it is purified love that we are talking about, there will be no jealousy.

In heaven we enter a world where we see God 'face to face'. This is known as the Beatific Vision and in traditional theological writing this was regarded as the primary joy of heaven.

Of course we do not see God with our present eyes. “Seeing” is just a metaphor for an experience of God’s presence to us that is intensely close and immediate. Medieval theologians debated however whether the chief joy of heaven was the vision of God or the unrestricted love that binds us all together there. The Dominicans following Aquinas opted for the vision. The Franciscans following Scotus opted for love. I believe love is the root joy of heaven and that it is that love that illuminates and makes immediately present to us the vision of God. Heaven is seeing God through the eyes of love.

**Death seals our situation for all eternity.** The saved will never get bored and decide to look for pleasures in forbidden ways. So there is no danger of sin spoiling the experience. Similarly there is no hope for the unrepentant sinner to become repentant and begin to love. Why is this so? Why is death the moment when our fate is sealed for all eternity? This is a simple question. But the issues it raises are not so simple.

The traditional answer is that this life is a period of testing, a trial in order to enable us to show through the use or abuse of our freedom whether we are worthy of salvation or damnation. There is some truth in this but it is like a leaky colander when one starts pressing the point further: why should the period of testing stop at death? The answer to that could be that it had to stop somewhere and God decided to make death serve that purpose.

But theologians don’t like questions that make God appear to be arbitrary – and unfair, since life is not an even playing ground for people. Some peoples’ lives are brought to a very untimely end through being run over by the proverbial bus while others live to a ripe old age. The time given to the two to develop a life that truly represents the fruit of an extensive testing is very different. And babies who die get what seems to be a freebie: an untested entry into heaven. It used to be believed that unbaptised babies went to Limbo, which was really part of damnation. But eventually sanity prevailed and theologians and even official church teaching rejected the idea of limbo. If even our weak love shrinks with horror at the idea of condemning a baby to the eternity of damnation, albeit a painless one, how much greater must God’s love reject such an idea.

Whatever the answer to the question of why death seals our destiny is, it will be satisfactory only if there is something in the very process of dying that seals whether we will be able to love for all eternity or unable ever to do so. One key factor is whether we die as people who have turned themselves into basically loving creatures or basically unloving ones. In the former case the Spirit has something to work on to transform even a weak love into an everlastingly strong one. In the latter case the Spirit is faced with a rejection of love.

The second key factor may be the nature of the new life on the other side of the grave. It would be one in which the self emptying demanded by love is experienced with crystal clarity. Those who die basically loving people find their love transformed and happily embrace its self-emptying demands. Those who die basically unloving people remain unable for eternity to accept its demands. They are like people trapped in a sulk. God does not need to condemn such people to hell. They choose hell by rejecting heaven.

This is of course speculation. The bottom line is that we simply do not know what it is about death that seals our eternal destiny.

**When will this confrontation of the dying person with naked Love take place?** In the early church it was widely though not universally believed that it took place only on judgement day at the end of time. Until then their souls slept. This I believe was the result of a mistakenly literal interpretation of Paul's reference to those who died before Christ's return as 'sleeping'. There are Christian groups who still believe in "soul sleeping" but within Catholicism such an idea disappeared off the theological map relatively quickly. The official position of our Church is that in death we enter into either heaven – or hell. And there are theologians who suspect that like Mary those entering into the full joys of heaven experience at the same time the resurrection of their bodies there and then.

**But what about Purgatory?** Well Purgatory is not a third option. Purgatory is really part of the community of the saved and therefore part of heaven but that part where their love is still in the process of purifying itself. There are no grounds for picturing purgatory as a gigantic torture chamber where hapless souls scream in agony until they pay the last penny of what they owe to God because of their sins. The souls in Purgatory may well indeed suffer

a great deal but it will be the suffering of love purifying itself. And there are those who believe that the process of purification may well be a very speedy, possibly instantaneous one. This could have been the case for martyrs and people proclaimed saints rapidly after their deaths. One does not have to imagine that they died with a totally purified love. But the traditional view, though not a dogma of our faith, was that it could take a long time and so the practice spread throughout the Church of praying for the souls in Purgatory. Whether the purification process takes time or not, what is a dogma of our faith is that for those whose love needs purification our prayers can be of help. To adapt a comment made by G K Chesterton about tradition as being the democracy of the dead, why should I be denied the benefit of your prayers simply because I am dead?!

**And then there is hell.** Hell is permanent self exclusion from the community of love that is heaven. It has been and will always be a topic of intensive discussion as to how a loving God can condemn people to an eternity of agony, the heart of which is a sense of eternal loss. But we need to remember that like heaven hell is not a place but an experience. It is an experience of being trapped in a self-centredness that one cultivated in one's life. Paradoxically, if we believe that God is love and that we are destined to enjoy the delights of love for all eternity and if we believe that love is not love if it is not freely given, then the possibility must exist that people can refuse to love. The very refusal to love is already even on this earth the beginnings of the experience of hell. Hell is the full flowering of that experience. Such a person can go to the pearly gates and demand to be given admission. But St Peter's answer would no doubt be: well, come in, the gates are merely for show. Wander for all eternity wherever you want to go: unfortunately you won't be happy because the only joy to be found here is the joy of loving. And you have thrown that gift away.

Will that awful experience be the fate of any human being? Our faith does not command us to believe that anyone will undergo that experience. But Our Lord's warnings about the reality of hell must be taken very seriously – and they are made precisely to make us repent and turn from being unloving to being loving people. Nevertheless, we can hope that God's grace will win over everyone. We are in good company here - Pope Francis has expressed that very hope.