

THE CHALLENGE OF HEAVEN

FR DOMINIC MILROY

Fr Dominic Milroy is a monk of Ampleforth Abbey and Cathedral Prior of Chester. This article was originally published in *The Tablet* on 30th March 2002 and is reproduced here with the kind permission of the publisher.

THE CONCEPT OF HEAVEN HAS NOT BEEN HAVING A GOOD PRESS LATELY. THE POWERFUL CONVICTION, HELD BY SOME ISLAMIC EXTREMISTS, THAT SUICIDE BOMBERS WILL GAIN THE IMMEDIATE REWARD OF PARADISE MAY APPEAR EASY ENOUGH TO BRUSH ASIDE AS BEING A SIMPLISTIC DISTORTION OF ALL RELIGION AS WELL AS OF ISLAM ITSELF. It does, however, have its roots in what may be called the 'religious' view of life, death and eternity, and it is this view which is being generally called into question, not only by our horror at fanaticism but also by the assumptions and the 'mindset' of Western culture itself.

This is happening at several levels. In the first place, there is a good deal of understandable sympathy (and not only among atheists) for the perception expressed by Professor Richard Dawkins and others that a worldview based on the hope of rewards after death has proved to be positively harmful. Christians may believe otherwise, but there is, historically, a case to answer, and this case has had, at the very least, the effect of eroding some of the easy confidence with which believers have spoken about heaven. To what extent is it still the case that the day-to-day behaviour of believers is motivated, in a primary way, by the hope of heavenly rewards?

In the second place, the general awareness of the nature and implications of genetic research has undermined many traditional perceptions of the origin and meaning of life, the relationship between body and soul, and the credibility of survival after death. This is not to say that modern research is in fact incompatible with faith or with a reasonably sophisticated theological view of life, but rather that it is perceived, by many people, as being so. As in the Age of Enlightenment, it is simply the case that religious thinking tends to lag behind new scientific insights. Believers are uneasy about their ability to absorb these insights into their way of perceiving God, and this unease makes the whole issue of heaven more problematic.

The same is true of the interface between faith and modern philosophy, or (to put it more broadly) between faith and the way in which most educated people think. The idea of a God who rewards people for good behaviour has, for most people, simply ceased to be attractive. Iris Murdoch, who was very far from being hostile to the religious view of life, was expressing commonly shared assumptions when she wrote in *The Sovereignty of Good* that 'in the case of morality, although there are sometimes rewards, the idea of a reward is out of place'.¹ The general legacy of modern philosophies, as they linger in the popular imagination and in shared

instincts, is that morality (in so far as there is such a thing) is too ambiguous to bear the weight of an ethic that contrasts salvation and damnation, and that therefore the idea of a God who rewards and punishes is simply no longer interesting.

Heaven ceases to be relevant to the human condition when it is no longer perceived as an alternative to hell. The traditional strength of the religious view of life was rooted in a conviction that the Four Last Things – Death, Judgement, Hell and Heaven – represented the true parameters within which the human drama was played out. The four are intimately connected, and the purchase which heaven held on the human spirit (and the human imagination) was inseparable from that held by the others.

What has happened? Death, as a concept, is now, as far as possible, to be evaded, and is regarded as being less important than, for example, health and personal hygiene. As for God's judgement, it would be an understatement to say that it has lost its awful finality. There is simply no shared sense whatsoever that the responsibility for doing right might have implications after death. This is, of course, an inevitable result of the most central development of all – the general acquiescence, amongst believers and unbelievers alike, in the rejection of the idea of hell. It is taken almost as axiomatic that the concept of hell can be reconciled neither with human morality (with all its ambiguities) nor with the notion of a benign God. By the same token, the concept of purgatory tends to be regarded (without further examination) simply as a quaint relic of Roman Catholic superstition.

In such a context, the notion of heaven has become so attenuated as to be almost meaningless. If the alternatives are ruled out as being 'unacceptable', and if the very idea of 'survival after death' is felt to be shrouded in improbability, then the whole idea of heaven becomes little more than an imprecise recipe for vaguely reassuring memorial services. The 'pearl of great price' has become a trinket, and the 'narrow way that leads to salvation' has become a vague track leading nowhere in particular.

I suggested earlier that religious interpretations of reality tend to lag behind the sharp insights of human science and philosophy. Our perception of heaven is a case in point, an example of a vastly important area of human experience and of religious aspiration which we have, quite simply, failed to update, through intellectual and imaginative laziness. The images of hell

'Our thinking, and our preaching, about heaven ... can only recover its power to shock if we jettison altogether the vocabulary and the imagery which have proved to be so deadening'

in Giotto's frescos in Scrovegni chapel in Padua are, at once, both wonderfully dramatic and wholly irrelevant to the modern perception of religious and human reality. They simply reinforce the impression that the religious view of human destiny no longer has any real importance. A reviewer of the 2002 production of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* remarked that, in an age when most clerics don't believe in damnation, 'it is difficult to take Marlowe's drama entirely seriously'. Quite so.

This credibility gap between traditional Christian images and modern assumptions about human reality is one that believers find very disconcerting. It is as if we had retained all the imagery of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and none of his philosophical and poetic sophistication. The genius of Dante was that he was at once wholly rooted in Scripture and in classical mythology and (in his own time) wholly modern. In the longer run, however, his imagery has trapped the Christian imagination in a kind of time-warp, and has made it very difficult for Christian thought and devotion to respond to the challenge of subsequent ways of perceiving what Pascal called *la réalité des choses*. Pascal was referring, in particular, to the huge psychological shift brought about by the Copernican revolution. The tragedy is that neither that revolution nor the many subsequent ones, rich in images of bliss and misery, led to any radical modification of the Christian images of heaven and hell. These have remained (in the popular consciousness) entirely medieval, and, as such, they have little or no purchase on the modern mind other than an aesthetic one.

Our thinking, and our preaching, about heaven and hell (and, indeed, about God) can only recover its power to shock if we jettison altogether the vocabulary and the imagery which have proved to be so deadening, and set about exposing modern assumptions to the richness of a fully scriptural understanding of the mystery of salvation. The trouble about the conventional images is that they are Scripture-based only in the narrowest sense, i.e. the visual images (clouds, thrones, flames, devils and so on) are extremely partial and superficial echoes of themes which are, in the Hebrew and the Christian Bible, far deeper and more sophisticated.

The sense of an innocence which has been lost, and of the need to search deeply for its recovery; the call to absolute and self-sacrificing love as the supreme and fruitful way of being human; the perception of time, in which the journey of the present is an act of fidelity both to the past and to the future, and in which the

passage of time is punctuated and celebrated by a sabbatical rhythm of thanksgiving and praise; the experience of exile and loss of identity as a cathartic passage towards simplicity of heart; the sense of being called to a covenant with the mystery of life – a covenant which grows from being a contract of duty into a marriage covenant of love, broken by infidelity but restored by repeated forgiveness; the sense of the earth as a garden which we have misused and of which we are stewards; the sense of human life as a mysterious journey in search of 'the face of God', a longing for that mysterious divine smile which shows itself intermittently in works of beauty and always remains beyond our grasp; a sense both of the finality of death and of its mystery; a sense of the sometimes terrible conflict between good and evil and of its unseen outcome; the tension between the awesome majesty of the universe and its inexplicable randomness. These are just some of the themes which give the Bible both its huge seriousness and its immediate relevance to any kind of modernity.

They are also themes which furnish us with a rich and diverse vocabulary and imagery when it comes to speaking of the Four Last Things. They invite us, not to describe heaven and hell in pictorial terms, but to suggest the mysterious depths which are implicit in the human condition. The experience of exile, of home (or the loss of it), of loneliness, of fidelity, of friendship, of love and hatred, of hope and despair – in all these areas it is not hard to find links between biblical and modern realities.

'The Word of God is like a two-edged sword', and it cuts hard into the realities which surround us daily. We must learn to speak of the Kingdom as Christ spoke of it, i.e. in parables. Heaven is a mysterious reality, both present and future, hidden beneath apparently small experiences: meals, journeys, losing and finding, growth, celebration, sharing, marriage, coming home, building, suffering. The great chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel, which concludes the account of Christ's preaching begun in the Sermon on the Mount, is not at all about 'rewards'; it is about the intrinsic realities of living in love or in its opposite. Heaven is not a future state dislocated from present actions; it is also a preset condition of union, which 'wells up into eternal life' in a way that the human mind cannot conceive. The language of Christ when speaking of heaven is the language, not only of parable, but also of sacrament, i.e. the specific 'art-work' which makes ordinary things bridges between time and eternity.

NOTES

1. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970.

► St Paul's teaching on heaven is more conceptual, but equally focused on the immediacy with which the death of Christ impacts on the ordinary realities of the human condition. Human life is trammelled and stunted by barriers – within ourselves, between ourselves and others, between creation and God, between time and eternity. These barriers impose on us a condition of alienation and frustration which prevents us from living fully as children of God. The Christ-event shatters these barriers, opening our lives to God and each other, and making possible the free movement of the spirit in human affairs.

Paul's words about alienation, division, reconciliation, self-emptying love, freedom and the possibility of human fulfilment are as relevant to our own day as they could possibly be. He makes no attempt to map out a future heaven, remarking to the Corinthians that this was something that 'human words cannot utter': 'eye has not seen, nor ear heard, the things which God has prepared for them who love him'. St Paul's present heaven is a dimension of life as we live it here and now, and consists in 'the supreme advantage of knowing Jesus Christ'. What lies beyond death is God's business, only to be perceived 'in a glass darkly'. All we know is that what we are and do in this life is heavy with consequences.

It is this 'heaviness with consequence' that needs to be breathed back into our instinctive and imaginative sense of heaven and hell. Vivid pictorial images cannot replace what is essential to the Scriptures, namely a sense of mystery, of human need and of moral and spiritual responsibility. The concept of heaven is a challenge rather than a consolation. The Easter gospels, which offer us no more than a few glimpses of what resurrection means, represent the heart of this challenge. The risen Christ is hard to recognise. He is both profoundly different and profoundly the same. Mary Magdalene recognises him when he names her in love. Peter recognises him in the experience of forgiveness. The disciples on the road to Emmaus recognise him in his expounding of the Scriptures and in the breaking of bread, Thomas recognises him in the touching of his wounds, and John in the mysterious echo, during a fishing expedition, of his first calling. These encounters were, for them, essential steps in their journey of discovery. They had been definitively weaned away from over-simplistic concepts of paradise.

A similar quest invites us all into more mature perceptions of what heaven is about. ■