Easter Sunday 2011

We hope for Heaven ~ but what is it like?

I want to talk to you, this Easter morning, about Heaven. On the basis that there’s no point in hoping for it, if we’ve little idea of what it’s like. So, my aim is to change that ~ and here goes:

A flock of sheep are grazing in a field, happily going "**baa** baa" to each other and discussing life as usual when suddenly they hear a "moo mooooooooooooooooooo!"

They look around and see only sheep. They carry on grazing as before.

"Moooooo mooooooooooo mmmoo!"

One sheep can hear it all a little too clearly not too far from her location. She shuffles away from the conversation she was in and approaches the source of the noisemaker, a worried look covering her face.

"Georgiana, why are you mooing?" she asks. "You're a sheep. Sheep go 'baa!'"

Georgiana replies, "I know, but I thought I would learn a foreign language!"

We talk the Good Friday language of death and suffering easily ~ sadly, *that* language is not foreign to us; but resurrection is beyond our experience, so we have no adequate language and concepts to cope with it. Taking Easter seriously requires us to learn a foreign language, a language in which we are passive, rather than active, and in which we are ‘okay’ *not* being in control.

Of course, don’t misunderstand me, being ‘out of control’ of suffering is *not* okay! The last time many of us were together in worship in this church it was stripped virtually bare as a mark of respect for Jesus’ death on the cross.

Jesus’ death was *the* most public humiliation and torture. The shock waves still ripple round the universe.

But we have come to church this morning in a different mood ~ upbeat and full of hope, and we can **only** do that with integrity *if* we believe that, for the first disciples of Jesus, somehow, between their going to bed on Saturday night and their waking up on Sunday morning, the world had been turned upside down.

In this upside-down resurrection-world cause and effect don’t connect as we expect. Death is the end; no, it’s not. The vulnerable have no hope; yes, they do. Let’s be honest, and admit that, underneath a polite religious response, it’s seriously difficult to make sense of the resurrection-world. Who tore-up the rule-book?

Surely, the most difficult thing about Easter is that, try as we might, we just *can’t* carefully categorise and control it. Easter forces us to learn how to be at the *receiving end* of what’s going on ~ to be the object, not the subject. At Christmas, we know what to do ~ we hasten to welcome the new-born king. In Lent, we repent and impose a discipline upon ourselves. Even in Holy Week we know what to do ~ we reproach ourselves for *our* rejection of Jesus. But, at Easter, it is all taken out of our hands ~ we play at still being in control, but the big picture is beyond our attempts to manipulate it. Jesus’ resurrection beckons us to try something radically different. Thus, the big picture of resurrection takes us beyond the comfort-zone of our everyday experience, and beckons us to dip our toes into the feisty waters of Heaven, which will, we are assured, be recognisable, but also vastly better than we could ever have dreamed.

I’m reminded of the old joke about a butterfly winging its elegant and colourful way, one Spring-time, past two caterpillars crawling along a twig. As the butterfly passed them, one caterpillar looked up, disdainfully, and was heard to say to the other: “You’ll never get me up in one of those things!”

The joke, of course, is that neither caterpillar could know that ‘to be a butterfly’ was, indeed, the next stage of their existence ~ after a death-like chrysalis stage. As far as we know, caterpillars have no knowledge that they are destined to soar and hover as beautiful butterflies; all they know is crawling.

Precisely because of that unexpected transformation, butterflies are symbols of new life. The new life of Heaven, which begins now as ‘life in all its fullness’, is in our hearts and minds on this Easter Day, even if the resurrection is, in all honesty, hard to see.

*Why* is the resurrection hard to see? I would suggest that resurrection is elusively hard to see, simply, because it is *more* real than the world to which our perceptions are fashioned, within which we have learned to live and to observe. Imagine yourself ~ lying paralysed on a bed in a small, dark sickroom. One day your nurse pulls back a blind that has covered a skylight in the ceiling, through which light rushes in. It tells you that there is another world, from your sickroom, out there ~ a world of sun, of fresh air, movement, growing plants. You can see none of them; but the light streaming into your room brings that whole unseen world vividly into your awareness. It is the world ‘out there’, beckoning you, though you cannot fully see it, which will renew, refresh and heal you, and make you fully part of its vibrant life.

Or ~ let’s try it another way:

The idea came to me that, we are like children, developing in the womb of the life to come, children who are not yet ready for birth. Like the human foetus we once were, we cannot imagine any other kind of life. We are secure in the warmth and dark of our little world. From it, we receive our nourishment and are content. Within it, we stretch and kick and think we have perfect freedom of movement. We share our mother’s life and fancy we know all about relationships. All this time, we have been growing lungs without even taking breath, eyes, without dreaming what sight means; legs, with not a clue about walking. We are equipped for horizons far beyond, and do not even know that we have the equipment. When the hour of our birth comes, we will call it dying, because it will be the end of the life we know, and we shall be harshly sent out into the unknown. The fact that we cannot imagine Heaven does not mean it is not there, and, rather than trying to understand it in advance, we had better get on with the life that is ours now, while our equipment for Heaven *grows* unseen.

There are clues to what it might be like to be faced, at death, with the possibility of Heaven, & I like this one from Ladislaus Boros, who writes:

“The individual existence stands, suddenly awake and free, on the frontier of the whole of reality. Being flows towards him like a boundless stream of things, meanings, persons and happenings. Yes, God himself stretches out his hand for him. In a last final decision, he either allows this flood of realities to flow past him, while he stands there eternally like a rock past which the life-giving stream flows on, or he allows himself to be carried along by this flood, becomes part of it, and flows on into eternal fulfilment”

Seen this way, entering Heaven is a joyful self-abandonment to going with the flow of God’s life and reality, and this world is a place where we can begin to form the habit of doing that. Well and good ~ but perhaps that picture of Heaven is at risk of portraying it a purely individual exercise. Austin Farrer, by contrast, writes: “Like it or not, Heaven is other people … it is God in other people, just as much as it is God in you!” “Then, what Heaven,” exclaims Farrer, “to be in Heaven, and to see on every side the glory of God reflected in the image of God which is the human face! What Heaven, to be in Heaven, and to delight, without a barrier, in the company of a thousand friends!”

Now, *that*, I believe, and hope, is our destiny! It is a destiny not just for the life to come, but to break-through and transform the here and now.

So, if you see a caterpillar today, give thanks for the glory of God that awaits you, in the company of others, for all eternity ~ and practice, in your dreams, soaring like a butterfly!

The good news is that, where we falter and flounder, and our imagination becomes feeble, and fails, God *can do it!* The Easter good news is that God *has already begun* this transformation in each of us, and *he started yesterday,* when we were asleep! Christ *is* risen, and we **have begun to** **be** *risen* with him! Now ~ there is a hope to live for!

“If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is.”

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