

Way, Truth, Life

What kind of a wierd house contains many mansions ? That has always baffled me. Yes, our translations say 'in my father's house are many rooms'. But whether it's the King James version, Elvis Presley's song, or the original Greek, it says mansions. And that is something of a bizarre image. I think, my father's house rather refers to households. What is Jesus saying ? It is about who has a share in the land. Those in power were the ones with the mansions, particularly in Southern Jerusalem. But Jesus says here, precisely what he says in the beautitudes : that the meek will inherit the earth.

Who are the meek ? People who rub their hands together in submissive politeness to all who come by ? The meek are simply those without a share in the land – they have not property of their own. They are the people of the land. And what will they inherit ? They will inherit ha-erets. The earth, but not earth as opposed to the moon or jupiter. Nor earth as apposed to heaven. What will they inherit ? The land ! The promised land, the covenant blessings – belong to the humble – not the wealthy landowners of Jerusalem !

In my Father's house – in other words – in my inheritance – there are many mansions, many estates. And though I go back to the Father now – I'm off to join him, I will be sharing my inheritance with you. You will belong to my household !

This week I was putting 3 year old Alice to bed, and after her story we say the Lord's prayer. Or at least, I say the Lord's prayer – and she says the final word of each sentence : hallowed be thy ...NAME, the kingdom ... TUM.... Thy will be ... DONE... and so it went on, till we get to 'lead us not into ...' HEAVEN ! Willem, who was observing the proceedings from the bedroom door, managed to quote Ned Flanders, and suggest that it would be better if Alice belonged to a less Hell-bound family !

But Alice was not so far from the truth – not simply because she belongs to a hell-bound family. We have often assumed that heaven is this place that we go when we die – and that Jesus invites us, at the point of death, to abandon earth for good. But this is quite simply wrong in every conceivable way. The early Christians, like their Jewish contemporaries, saw heaven and earth as the overlapping and interlocking spheres of God's good creation, with the point being that heaven is the control room from which earth is run.

To say that Jesus is now in heaven is to say three things. First, that he is present with his people everywhere, no longer confined to one space-time location within earth, but certainly not absent. Second, that he is now the managing director of this strange show called 'earth', though like many incoming chief executives he has quite a lot to do to sort it out and turn it around. Third, that he will one day bring heaven and earth together as one, becoming therefore personally present to us once more within God's new creation. The Bible doesn't say much about our going to heaven. It says a lot about heaven, and particularly heaven's chief inhabitant, coming back to earth.

And yes, there is a crucial future dimension to this. But equally strongly there is a present dimension. This is not simply about Jesus comforting his disciples, as the NIV paragraph heading would suggest. We are being invited into the overlap of the ages, invited into that painful intersection between heaven and earth. Having an inheritance in the Kingdom of God,

does not mean that you've got your place in the Sun, either this side of death or the other. It is rather, that having glimpsed what is happening in the control centre, you become a conscious part of the action of God in the world.

But then, how good a job is heaven doing? I have a friend many of you will have heard of – Lewis Misselbrook. He used to put a great poster on the big wooden notice board outside his church with a catchy message which was changed every week. And one week a motorist skidded out of control and destroyed the structure. All that was left of it was the board itself, with the words, 'what on earth are you doing for heaven's sake'? That seems to me to be the question we this passage leaves us with. It's the kind of challenge that prevents the comfort Jesus offers from being some convenient piece of otherworldly spiritual bubble-wrap.

Heaven is not the place where you embroider the initial's RIP on your eternal armchair. It is the nerve-centre of the universe. And in Jewish tradition the point at which heaven touched earth had always been the temple of Jerusalem. But now, it is not through the temple, nor through the Torah, but through none other than Jesus himself. I am the way, the truth and the life – he says – no one comes to the Father but through me. Way, Truth and Life are all active, dynamic events – not some correct procedures for climbing the stairway to heaven. Way – is clearly dynamic. Life is clearly dynamic. And Truth is really an activity, from a verb which means radical 'exposure', openness, unveiling – they are words about an active relationship. This is Paul uses the verb in Ephesians – not speaking the truth in love, as the NIV would have it, but literally, truthing in love. Truth is about a way of relating.

If Jesus is the way, the truth and the life : Heaven is about living journeying, relating, living – and it is manifest here and now. No longer is Jerusalem the place where this happens. Today it is in worship. It is here that we are gathered, commissioned and sent into the world to do even greater things than Jesus himself.

Just as well, because we are probably aware of the enormous economic crisis that grips the globe. That food prices have spiralled out of control, to the point where the world bank forecast that over a hundred million people will face chronic hunger very soon. But what we are not hearing is that last year, while this price rise was accelerating, the planet achieved the largest grain harvest ever known. There is enough food for people – more than enough. But most of it is being fed to animals, which are then being fed to rich people.

Now I love meat – but maybe, if we follow the way, the truth and the life of Jesus in our world, I will find myself eating much less of it. I'm not suggesting that we must become vegetarians. But the average British person eats 40 percent more meat than the average inhabitant of planet earth. Though this is less than half the meat that the average North American will consume. Maybe we should consider sharing the practice of the vast majority of the people God has ever created, and saving meat for special occasions. If we refuse to make these sorts of sacrifices, then What on earth are you doing for heaven's sake?

In fact, that question is sharpened when you consider the ecological impact of the livestock that supplies our meat : gas produced by Britain's ten million cows does more environmental damage that produced by Britain's cars. Cutting back on our meat consumption is an

ecological as well as economical act of righteousness. What on earth are you doing for heaven's sake ?

Ecologically we can ask where the most damage is inflicted upon our world that God so loved he sent his only son. And in a city like London, and in a church like Bloomsbury, this is an uncomfortable question. Many have travelled here from around the globe, and many of us travel from here around the globe. And yes, we can shop in trendy places, and tinker with eco-friendliness, but that question should haunt us, and take deeper roots in our ecological lifestyle : what on earth are you doing for heaven's sake ?

In a world that offers its own vision of heaven : the thin veneer of the perfect smile, the empty promise of consumerism, the all-too-temporary satisfaction of materialism, the insatiable appetites of success, and technology and lust. A vision of heaven that drives us – the image of Jesus as the way the truth and the life impinges its own question upon us – its own vision of heaven accompanied by the question, **what on earth are you doing for heaven's sake.**

This week a carefully researched report has been published, outlining what British people believe to be the ten worst evils of our society. A hundred years ago issues like slavery, opium use, intemperance and gambling were listed – a very different list appears today : *The top 10 evils identified in the report were: the decline of community; individualism and selfishness; consumerism and greed, a decline of values, the decline of the family, young people as both victims and perpetrators, drugs and alcohol, poverty and inequality, immigration and responses to it, and crime and violence.*

But at the root of these evils, many people saw problems of consumerism – of constantly believing that your worth is dependant upon the things that you own – and when an entire society embraces these beliefs, the knock on effects are disastrous. But this consumerist vision is an alternative vision of heaven. It is the engine room for the top ten social evils – and I suspect that this is not peculiar to Britain. It is worth asking ourselves to what extent the vision of a consumer heaven drives our daily life – and it is worth asking ourselves to what extent our vision of God's heaven drives our daily life. Because it seems to me that only then, can we properly ask ourselves 'what on earth we are doing for heaven's sake'.

It is a question that requires enormous character to ask. In fact, it is the question most of us only tend to ask when we have faced some sort of crash, when our own lives have veered out of control – just like the car outside that church. But if this is an act of worship, where our whole lives are exposed to the transforming power of God's Holy Spirit, then it is a question we cannot escape.

There is a great piece of comedy in today's tragic reading from Acts : Stephen has been appointed the first deacon ever – appointed to do practical stuff, so that apostles can get on with preaching and prayer. But Stephen, accused of blasphemy by some disgruntled Jews – launches into a sermon more powerful and a prayer more gracious than anything recorded of an apostle ! What on earth were they doing for heaven's sake. Well, Stephen, was a person full of the Holy Spirit, rooted in Scripture, full of wisdom and worship. But he was a man of action, who knew jolly well that he had literally given up his life – and were he here today... you already know the question I believe he would put to us.