

Hymns: **“Heavenly Father, You have brought us”**
 457 “Author of faith, eternal word”
 588 “I come with joy, a child of God”
 550 “Forth in thy name, O Lord I go”

Readings: **Hebrews 11:1-3 & 8-16**
 Luke 12:32-40

“WHAT’S A HEAVEN FOR?”

I was accredited as a Local Preacher in 1964. If all the people who’ve listened to the sermons I’ve preached in the intervening 52 years were laid end to end, they’d all be (in all likelihood).... fast asleep!

My minister in those far off days, a true man of God, gave me a little book as a present to celebrate that occasion. It was entitled: “Evangelism and Pagan England.” And was written by a man who had often preached from this very pulpit – a man named J Ernest Rattenbury. The author identified a number of things that had changed radically in the modern world. He’d begun preaching in the 1890’s and these changes had made it much more difficult, he argued, for preachers seeking to “win people for Christ.” Here’s the list of the major changes as he identified them:

- the diminishing of respect for the authority of the Bible;
- the secularisation of Sunday;
- the decay of puritanism (the revolution in sexual practices and thinking);
- the falling away of fear in hell and judgement.

When all those things have been diluted, robbed of any power they may once have had, preaching becomes quite a challenge. Indeed, it’s my view that preachers these days, faced by this challenge, have too often just given up. This is a major factor to explain in the demise of preaching in our Churches today.

It’s the question of hell (and heaven) that I want to deal with this morning. Do I believe in hell? That’s the question that severely threatened a friendship formed in this church. It’s been difficult hanging onto a good solid relationship since our disagreements on this subject. But before I answer the question directly, let me say that I have known and seen quite a number of people who, it appears to me, were languishing in some kind of hell. It’s always been a hell of their own making – a hell that was usually a consequence of something or someone in whom trust had been placed and who proved incapable of delivering the beneficial outcomes expected and longed for. It might be people who let them down – friends, loved ones, colleagues; or it could be the world they’d created for themselves failing to offer anything of significant depth – money, drugs, hedonistic lifestyles, the fashion of the day or whatever. They’d experienced betrayal, treachery, back-stabbing, cruelty at the hands of human beings. Or they’d come to see how paper-thin their lifestyle

choices had been as their hopes crashed and their loneliness and disillusionment grew.

Oh yes, I've seen many people in turmoil and "Hell". But do I believe in Hell as a physical location? As a place that will one day be found and photographed by Google Earth? As a place where there will be wailing and gnashing of teeth? As some version of Dante's "Inferno"? Well no I don't believe in such a way of thinking about Hell. Indeed, I can't believe that the God I believe in would consign people to everlasting agony. I believe in a God who allows me to refuse to believe in him. So, if I should ever discover that a physical Hell exists and awaits some of us, then I think I would play that card and pull out of my life-long relationship with my Heavenly Father.

And that brings us to, it lands us safe in, heaven.

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you his kingdom."

"By faith" [like Abraham] "we can look forward to a city that has foundations whose architect and builder is God.... For God has prepared [such] a city for us."

It is the idea of heaven that allows us to invest the lives we live with the colours and qualities of hope. Having some external reference point, being able to transcend the narrow limits of our own selves, is a kind of "starter course" for the full-scale meal called "Heaven" which we seek to enjoy.

- If we see something of heaven in a glorious sunset, the birth of a baby, a work of art;
 - If we glimpse the city of God in the loveliness of creation, the love of a friend, the sacrifice of a mother;
 - If we hear something of Heaven in a piece of music, an affirming word, a harmony of purpose
- then Heaven will be the stimulus that eggs us on to turn daily survival into a true and meaningful life, and life itself into an abundance of living.

Heaven, properly understood, can never become:

- a mere escape;
- a pious dream;
- an excuse;
- a fantasy;
- an illusion (à la Sigmund Freud);
- an opiate (à la Karl Marx);

but rather a construct that allows and enables us to mitigate the rougher aspects of everyday experience. It becomes the goad, the catalyst, that urges and inspires us to make the most of things, to discover resilience deep down within ourselves, to

release courage and to enjoy inner strength which we might never otherwise have claimed or imagined.

Before continuing with these thoughts, I must introduce two caveats. Let me start with some words from one of the early books of John Milton's "Paradise Lost". Satan is trying to rally the spirits of the angels who've fallen from heaven with him. They are weltering in a bath of self-pity and woe. He appeals to them. He reminds them that they can do rather better with the crisis that faces them than merely to indulge in such negative attitudes. Here are his words:

*The mind has its own place and of itself
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.*

That was John Milton's Satan that was. "Get up from the pit," he goads them. "Banish your negative thinking." The capacity of the human mind to create its own hell is one thing. But it can also do the reverse trick and Satan is calling his followers to do just that. But we should be careful about the tricks of the mind. They can lead to very unpredictable consequences. They can sow a seed within our mental processes that grow till, like an unexploded grenade, they threaten to blow up in our face.

That's one word of warning – temptation when thinking of heaven to let such thinking warp our minds. The other is the temptation to think of Heaven as a way of ignoring or by-passing the injustices or difficulties of life. Margaret and I watched a James Bond movie last night, a film called Skyfall. The final scene shows James Bond and Judi Dench in a house that's exploding and ablaze. There's no way a living being can escape from such a threatening environment. Except that there's a kind of secret door and passage that allows them, at the very last moment, to get out of the scrape that they find themselves in. Heaven must never be used in such a fantastical way. It is not an excuse for pretending that bad things don't exist. Nor must heaven in our minds resemble the picture of paradise in the mind of the suicide bomber who plays his "move-directly-to-GO (or is it Prison?)" card in the belief that paradise awaits with all its virgins and other blessings.

Heaven isn't a *deus ex machina*, a convenient device, that allows us to put our brains on hold.

In last night's film, James Bond was supposed to have been killed in one of his adventures, mistakenly shot by a colleague. But he sprang back into action and this led another character to put a direct question to him. "What's your philosophy of life?" He was asked. James Bond, without a moment's hesitation, gave a one word reply.

"Resurrection" he declared

All of which leads us to the big question. How exactly do I claim the blessings of heaven? How should I live, what attitudes should I cultivate, in order to embrace these benefits?

The scripture helps us to answer these questions:

“Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Be sure you know what you’ll be happy to let go of if you found yourself on a sinking ship or driven out of your comfort zone. Be clear about the things that are essential and distinguish them from what can be discarded.

“Be ready for action”. “Be on your guard; be alert; attempt great things **for** God, expect great things **from** God. Like Abraham, we will be given the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction things not seen.”

“Be ready to obey and set out for destinations you cannot yet see.”

Being ready for anything is the answer to the question. Not settling into dull and predictable routines. Always ready for the next challenge. Expecting to see the good in the people we meet. Look for a creative way to handle tricky situations. Think of a problem as a challenge instead of an obstacle. For the bridegroom just might come in the middle of the night, at a moment when we least expect him. Being ready, expectant, keen is the attitude which ought to define our Christian lives.

I’ve often used a poem by R S Thomas in the sermons I’ve preached at Wesley’s Chapel. Here’s one entitled “Kneeling”.

*Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun’s light
Ringing me, as though I acted
A great role. And the audiences
Still; all that close throng
Of spirits waiting, as I,
For the message.*

*Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost,
The meaning is in the waiting.*

Ah ha! “The meaning is in the waiting”. For all of us taking bread and wine this morning, the meaning is in the waiting. Taking these simple tokens of God’s love as shown in Christ is a sign that we are waiting for the fulfilment of his promises. For this is the foretaste of the heavenly banquet prepared for all people. If we can take these elements expectantly, open to the inpouring of God’s spirit, then we shall catch the essential meaning of this feast and espy the Kingdom of Heaven itself. For Robert and Shirley Maginley, contemplating new pastures, they too must remember to wait expectantly, with hope, and faith, and trust. For the meaning is in the waiting.

We Christian people are a waiting people and we long for all that will one day answer our prayers and accomplish our joy in the unchanging presence of our Creator God.

Amen