



Thoughts Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic.

5. Heaven

Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a Time of Pandemic. Number 5: Heaven

At the present time the news is dominated by two things, the rapidly increasing number of deaths from the Corona Virus Pandemic and the disruption it creates. The social isolation forces us in on ourselves and makes us face up to our personal thoughts, fears, and challenges that we might otherwise have hidden away. In these *"Thoughts, Poems and Reflections in a time of Pandemic"*. I describe some of these, and how through facing them we may find fulfilment in the lives we seek.

The three previous poems are ones which describe trauma and despair, yet most religious beliefs promise salvation and an after-life, in which images of heaven are described. This may vary from the Christian perceptions of a place of Glory in the presence of God to the enlightenment or Nirvana in the Buddhist tradition where the self is absorbed into enlightenment, so there is no personification of God. Or in Hinduism, where multitudes of Gods represent a deeper presence in all religions: which is of a God and Heaven greater than any physical representation that cannot be otherwise expressed.

HEAVEN

Is heaven a place when observed from afar
The Palace of God in His Might and His Power
A place where the righteous sing out His Praise
To God in His Glory, and where no humour strays?
You show me a place where my feet must feel sore
From standing and singing God's praise evermore
Then sometimes I'd tire of the bright golden light
And instead wish to see the stars of the night.

But these views of heaven are not ones of mine
For my thoughts see heaven a place outside time
Where eternity soars free in its own place apart
To observe the time passing like lines on a chart
Extracting from life all the times which we've set
When all the best moments of life have been met
And revealing in these the whole Godhead of joy
With each moment the fountain of love I enjoy.

Eternity is not now, in the future or past
For eternity is where every moment shall last
And the heaven I sense is piled high to the brim
With the passion of love and of care and concern
Overflowing with people whose delight I perceive
Through love which I give and the love I receive
And joining those people whose rapture I share
Are all those I love who will always be there.

Heaven is not here, in the earth or the sky
And you will never find heaven however you try
For heaven finds you from the cries of the heart
Then growing through gladness its praises impart
For whatever our suffering our weakness or strife
When we share all we are with the others in life
We rebuild ourselves in the love and the grace
At one with creation that gives us our place.

Then heaven is never a goal we'll achieve
It comes only from faith and the will to believe
But could heaven be true or is it solely in mind?
It is only through death such an answer we'll find
And should heaven be false we will never detect
For we'd have nothing left to confirm it's correct
But the heaven that comes in our heavenly birth
Is true to the heaven we'd make here on earth.

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REFLECTION

There is an enormous gap between the earlier poems of despair in this series and this one of heaven. That gap can only be crossed once hope is created. Christianity as with other religions creates the framework for that hope and that also includes the promises joy and fulfilment in the afterlife to come. This hope is expressed in the Comfortable Words in the Christian Tradition: "*So God loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to the end that all that believe in him should not perish; but have everlasting life*". We have seen in the earlier poems that despair and guilt do not only arise when we have done something wrong. They also arise when we have not been able to live up to the expectations which we enforce upon our own selves or are demanded of us by others. In Matthew 11 verses 28 to 30 Jesus says "*Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*" Words are without meaning when no action is taken and it is the responsibility of all of us who are able, to put these promises into effect.

But what about the promise of heaven itself? Christianity imagines Jesus and God as human personifications, but in this analysis, God can be represented in purely abstract terms, as the essence of Love. Our imaginations are bounded by thoughts and experiences which lie within chronological time, but the images of heaven which we are given by Jesus, and those in the Old Testament describe a certainty which lies outside it. Like Jesus, we can create our own parables of heaven, but these are also within the same time limits, and cannot be complete accounts. Other people will create their personal images. These images may have many elements in common but no two will be alike. There are many epithets and parables to guide us. In the Wisdom of Solomon 2:23: we read that "*For God created man to be immortal and made him to be an image of his own eternity*" and in Colossians 1:15 we read about Jesus and the Kingdom of Love: "*who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation*". The seven heavens in religious or mythological cosmology described in the Bible identify seven levels or divisions of Heaven. The concept, derived

from ancient Mesopotamian religions, can be found in all the Abrahamic religions such as Islam, Judaism and Christianity. A similar concept is found in some Indian religions such as Hinduism. Islam bans any pictures of a living being. In Judaism God was considered so holy his name could not be fully spelled out or spoken, nor could any physical image be provided, instead He is found in the burning bush, or described in abstract terms, such as the God of Love, or the still small voice.

For all these reasons, a simple vision of Heaven based on chronological expectations cannot suffice. This means that we must create our own images, which make use of these allegories. People may find the visions of heaven described by St John the Divine in the book of Revelation very inspiring and relevant for their purpose, but for these reasons they should not be considered universal. When we recognise this, we can better understand their use in this book, which was to convey messages to the Churches. Historically there are other people such as Swedenborg and Joseph Smith who have tried to propagate their own visions as bases for a universal belief.

A further but less usual source which supports the concept of a heaven which lies outside time, is the Apocryphal Gospel of Thomas. However, it is important to note that this Gospel is not being used here as sacred scripture. In line with the approach which I am adopting with all religious texts in these reflections, this Gospel is treated entirely as a secular and independent text. See the postscript for more details. The themes in the Gospel; and in my poem do have a commonality, even though this poem was written long before I ever looked at the Gospel for this purpose. The penultimate verse in particular: *"Heaven is not here, in the earth or the sky; And you will never find heaven however you try; For heaven finds you from the cries of the heart; Then growing through gladness its praises impart"*, is strongly expressed in this Gospel.

Other areas are relevant to these reflections and the first two lines of the next verse of the poem *"Then heaven is never a goal we'll achieve; It comes only from faith and the will to believe"* may be relevant to these arguments. Here a little bit of theology is needed. The doctrines of justification by faith or by works... and by implication entry into heaven, caused disputes in the early Church. The doctrine of justification by faith asserts that it is because of their faith that believers are forgiven, rather than for the good works they have done. Paul strongly argued for this doctrine of justification by faith, but James, (in the Epistle of James), placed much greater emphasis on good works. In Matthew 13:33 Jesus told his disciples a parable, which also appears in Luke 13:20-21: *"The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."* *"Again, he asked, 'What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough.'" This parable appears as saying 96 in the Gospel of Thomas. Saying 97.... which immediately follows it states: "The kingdom of the Father is like a woman who is carrying a jar filled with flour. While she was walking on the way, very distant from home, the handle of the jar broke and the flour leaked out onto the path. But she did not know it; she had not noticed a problem. When she reached her house, she put the jar down on the floor and found it empty."* Although Saying 96 appears in the Gospel texts. Saying 97 does not. When these two parables are taken together the working of the flour is compared with its loss. Together, these parables show that the Kingdom of Heaven will be lost if care is not taken to maintain its demands. The same theme is present in sayings 11, 24, 40, 41, 50, 61, and 70 of the Gospel of Thomas. According to these texts, justification is not by the statements of faith, or by the good works argued over by James and Paul, but by the degree of care and commitment to the Gospel message and to the love it presents. It is an ongoing obligation which does not depend on how much or how little work can be carried out. We are all embraced in God's Love and nobody is excluded if no work can be done. Regardless of the authenticity or otherwise of the Gospel of Thomas, this is a decision I come to in the poem itself.

Jesus said "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid". We ask or pray that we will all find that peace.

The complete collection of reflections is available is available at: www.com.tqdr.co.uk/articles/001C-PandemicThoughts.pdf