

THE CHRISTIAN VISION OF LIFE AFTER DEATH

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FIRST TALK: 4 November 2020

Introductory

Welcome to this short series on the Christian vision of life after Death. Wherever you may be, I hope you will find these talks or conversations helpful, and that they will enrich the November celebrations to be held in Knock and elsewhere for those you love, who are now fully with God.

We will explore four topics:

1. Christian Hope in a Doubting World.
2. The Resurrection of Jesus: Stubborn Facts
3. Death as Joyous Homecoming
4. God's Project for the World

1: Christian Hope in a Doubting World

A word about Myself: I'm an Irish Jesuit, living in Dublin. I have had a lifelong scholarly interest in the issue life after death, and have been long involved in Adult Faith Formation. Now that I am older, that interest has shifted from a notional to a real concern, as Newman would say!

I have written a number of items on the mystery of life after death: *Where to from Here? The Christian Vision of Life after Death* 2011, and *To Grow in Love: A Spirituality of Ageing, Dying and Glory* 2017.

I became involved in Knock 30 years ago and helped develop the Prayer Ministry there, or what we now call the mystical dimension of our faith: the awareness that we are limitlessly loved by God and invited into a deep divine relationship which carries us through life and death into eternal life. That is the inspiration for these talks.

But before coming on air I was asking myself: who am I to talk about our topic, life after death? It's a bit like talking about life on Mars! I've never met anyone who has experienced life after death. I myself have not yet died! Novices going on Pilgrimage as an Ignatian experiment used ask me, 'Did you ever do it yourself?' No! My Mother used say: 'No one has ever come back to tell us... There were no witnesses to the Resurrection' If those gone before us could return and share a word...

But there were experiences of the Risen One, and we can choose to rely on them and the insights that they generated about the life of the world to come. And we can catch on in the doing and verify the truth of the new life. We will be tentative and go gently. Hints rather than dogmas!

A word about Ourselves

We are a transient community, gathered from around the globe by the miracle of Information Technology.

Some of you may be ill from Covid; others may have escaped the virus so far but dread getting it. But all of us know of someone who has contracted the Virus or died from it. We include them all in our prayer this month,

I work in our Jesuit Nursing Home and lost 7 friends to Covid in a fortnight at Easter. I happened to be Re-reading Hemingway's *For whom the Bell tolls!* The quote is from the poem of John Donne (d 1631): *No Man is an Island: 'Any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind: Send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.'...* Whether we know it or not, everyone's death affects us all – We know this from the new cosmology which tells us that we are all interrelated. What sense can we make of death, or must it be an impossible burden to us?

- What have we to say about this sudden global rise in death statistics due to Covid: 1.2m...?
- Terence McSwiney's death by hunger strike 100 years ago was shown in frightening detail on RTE a few weeks ago. Did the question arise for you as to what happened to him after he died? Where is he now, and where are all our beloved departed?
- What can we say of the tragic O'Sullivan family in Kanturk where a father and two sons were recently killed?
- Do we allow these deaths to affect us? Could it be that God is trying to get something important across to us in them? Merton: *'Every moment and every event in every person's life plants seeds of spiritual vitality in their souls... But most do not take root...'* Are deaths then moments of grace if we can catch on?

Our Starting Point

Let's begin with an important question: 'Where are you?' This is God's first word to Adam in Genesis: God strolling in the Garden, looking to chat with Adam and Eve. **'Where are you?'** It wasn't an accusing Q, but an anxious one, full of love and concern.

God asks us the same Q regarding death: Jesus came to destroy death, to make of it an in-between moment rather than a terminal darkness.

Can you trust in the divine promise: 'I will come and take you to myself...'? (Jn 14:3). Are you Sceptical --Uncertain? Agnostic --Honestly admitting you just don't know? Have you Wavering hope -- desperately clinging to the shreds of past belief and hoping for some light from these talks?

Do you wonder **'Is this all there is?'** 2017. In researching this book, G Lohfink interviewed a good German pastor who shocked him by telling him that family affairs rather than eternal issues were the main concern of most of those faced with death... Such concerns were: 'Will I be a burden? What will happen my family? Did I do enough for them?' 'What about my will?' Nothing about dying or the world to come. The pastor asked: 'Should we trouble such good people with talk about the hereafter?' (p7)

For many Christians today, is this life **As Good As It Gets** – As the Jack Nicholson film has it? Worse, is it as Macbeth says: *'A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing? Where are you?'* Let's pray to be enlightened, for we are exploring a deep mystery of God. I've prayed over these talks, and I'll be praying for you.

A few years ago, **Death Cafés** came into being, and are now global, both real and virtual (Google!). If you go upstairs you might expect to find people like yourself who wanted/needed to talk about the meaning of death, and how best to prepare for it. We can think of ourselves as an Internet Death Café! Or better, as we shall see, a Resurrection Café!

We will cover a good deal of ground – you might like to take a note of things that strike you. Grace comes tailor-made. What is God trying to say to you? I'd hope that our conversations may generate conversation with friends.

You may ask: Why the recent decline even in Christian Belief about the afterlife?

- Prior to Vatican Two there was massive belief by Catholics in the world to come. Since then the social props of religious practice have largely vanished. The custom of calling the priest... Story: 'Dad is dying. We've called the GP.' Priest: 'Good: Should I come?' 'Jaysus no, Father! He's bad enough already: that'd kill him!'
- Our scientific age is not sympathetic to Faith, so there has been a large erosion of belief in the afterlife even among those who profess to be Catholic. I meet Catholics who say to me: 'Don't tell me I'm dying – I don't want to know'. Is this because the relics of Christian belief in the 'Last Things' are not comfortable—Worry about Hell-- Image of God as Judge...

punishment for unrepented sin... Purgatory; Eternal loss... Some people just want to get funerals over with...

- Following on from that is the fact that the branch of theology which deals with our understanding of the 'Last Things' (Eschatology) is in disarray and out-dated. Joking sign outside the relevant Department: 'Closed for Repairs. Come back later!' At Vatican Two concern for this life and the Church's role in it eclipsed concern for what happens after. Also Church scandals have not helped the Church to speak with authority.
- The question, **Where are the dead?** seldom arises these days. Counter-cultural. It is not Politically Correct to raise it. Story: My IT article! People 'pass' rather than die. Ernest Becker wrote *The Denial of Death*, in 1973. Is his thesis still true half a century on? (3). The culture of our times does not support intelligent exploration of the issue. People find it hard enough to cope with this life; the pace of life and its demands mean that longer range issues are shelved. (Perhaps Covid may help us to catch on to the bigger story again?).
- The idea that we *cease to be* at death is less appalling than it used to be, at least for those who live comfortable lives. As a friend in Stage Four of cancer says to me, 'I've had a good innings. It will all end, and that'll be that. And that's ok.' But those who suffer greatly in this life, or have lived under injustice, hope for the transformation of their existence, for justice, for a life one can truly call human. This happens to be one of Ben XVI's arguments for life after death! (*Spe Salvi*). 'The best is yet to come'? Is this only wishful thinking?

The Gift of Hope

The best gift Christianity can offer to the world is a well-reasoned hope in the life of the world to come. We hold this treasure in trust for the world. We may be few, but since we are all interconnected that may be enough to affect all. 'A rising tide raises all boats' (JFK). If one human person—Jesus-- has risen from the dead, then all are risen, as the NT puts it. We can be confident witnesses. We have Good News.

By the end of this series, I hope you will '*always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting of the hope that is in you. (1Pt 3:15)*. Seeds of a renewed Church are centred here. Pope Francis wants us all to be evangelisers – carriers of God's good news, and life after death is at the heart of the Good News.

You might ask: Where are you on our topic, Brian?

I choose to believe in the resurrection of the dead. But it gets tested to the core and I have to renew my commitment to it whenever disasters and great evil disrupt the world. It's hard work. I respect those who do not believe: this includes most of my friends and relatives. They have their reasons for not believing in a world to come. But it is a belief. —I have my reasons for believing. Neither of us can PROVE our belief. We don't have scientific evidence regarding the world to come, if there is one. There is no documentary!

But human life is like that: you can't prove that the persons you are choosing as your life-partner will measure up; that the driver won't crash the plane; that the judge is impartial; that the water isn't poisoned; that the petrol is not in fact diesel; that the brakes will work and that the bank won't collapse. Human living is sustained by reasonable belief, often based on Promises and the perceived trustworthiness of others--not on visible certainty. I have decided to believe that the evidence for a life to come is enough.

I believe that God exists and creates and sustains the world and all of us; that God is the Author of all life, and intends eternal life for us; that God is God of the living, not the dead. So there are no dead persons: People certainly die – many millions have done so since human life began. But they are all, I believe, alive in a new dimension where relationships are made good, where they grow to their full potential, and where JOY in God and one another is central— as CS Lewis says 'Joy is the serious business of heaven'.

In the next talk we will explore the stubborn evidence for Jesus' Resurrection, and you must decide if belief in it is reasonable. Everything about belief in the world to come and our sharing in it hangs on the truth of the Resurrection. The astounding claim is made in our Liturgy: 'Dying you destroyed our death; rising you restored our life. Lord Jesus, come in glory!'

NOTES TO FIRST TALK

1. Shakespeare has Macbeth say this at the crisis point of his life – his wife has died, his kingdom is falling apart, his dreams are shattered.

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

2. Topics: Last Sacraments; Death; struggle; heaven; hell; Original sin; purgatory; interim state; judgment—image of God—Fear, terror—*Dies Irae*; Old Testament vs New Testament re God's 'enemies'; Christ's descent into hell; limbo; indulgences; communion of saints; Eternity; resurrection of body; universal salvation; beatific vision; Soul/body; Resurrection of body; age; Last Day; Peace/sleep, rest or more? - burial of suicides & unbaptised; Space/Time; Second Coming; Angels/demons...
3. Becker says: *We don't understand life because we don't understand the purpose of creation. Life seeks to expand in unknown directions for unknown reasons. Modern man is drinking or drugging himself out of awareness (of the meaning of life) or he spends his time shopping, which is the same thing. Society contrives to help him forget (284).*
4. Becker (160) notes the most remarkable achievement of the Christian world picture: that it could take slaves, cripples, imbeciles, the simple and the mighty, and make them all secure heroes simply by taking a step back from this world (with all its horrors) into another dimension of things, the dimension called heaven. In other words while people try to deny death in so many ways, Christianity made our consciousness (and acceptance) of it the very condition for winning out against all the odds. Christians became 'cosmic heroes' by facing the great challenge of death and winning through it with God's help.