

# THE CHRISTIAN VISION OF LIFE AFTER DEATH

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**THIRD TALK: 18 November 2020**

## **Death as Joyous Homecoming**

### **Introductory**

Resume of the second talk: We focussed on the evidence for the Resurrection. The facts of Jesus' life and death. The empty tomb and the transformation in the disciples. Their preaching: 'God has raised Jesus from death, and we have seen him'. They gave their lives for the truth of these encounters. The power of the Resurrection is already enlivening our world, and we can be the Good News of it in the present tense because we can meet the Risen One in daily intimate encounter. Now we move to the theme of death as a joyous homecoming.

### **Death as Joyous Homecoming**

I hope the previous talk deepened your sense that what we call 'the life of the world to come' is not simply in the remote future but already shaping our current living. There is a tension between the 'Not Yet' of the final state of things and the 'Already Now' of present existence. The constant factor between these two realities is our experiencing Enlivening Relationships. In this life (the already now) they can wax and wane: in the world to come they are experienced in their fullness!

Already the Risen One is close to us: he desires to share his life with us. How far can this go? Ignatius goes beyond the concept of sharing and adds quietly: 'How much he desires to give himself to me, as far as he can'. When we die, this desire of God to be given to me reaches overwhelming fulfilment.

We noted earlier the joke about Eschatology--the study of the world to come--as being 'closed for repairs' and that we should come back later: well, the world to come is already fully open and always will be. Those who die are welcomed,

desired, awaited, wanted. We are smiled on. As a French mystic summarised her God's relationship with her, 'You gazed on me and you smiled'. In Job's words, 'In my flesh I shall see God and find him not aloof.' And we are thanked: 'Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord!'

1. In death we meet God, the source of all life. An immense love awaits us. 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you' (Augustine). This is at the heart of Jesus' promises: 'in the world to come, you will receive eternal life' (Mk 10:30; Lk 18:30). 'I have come that you may have life—and have it to the full' (Jn 10:10). 'I will come and take you to myself...' (Jn 14:3). God shares Godself with us, and God IS eternal life. God is God of the LIVING! In the Christian view there are no dead people. In death occurs the great Interpersonal life-giving encounter.
  
2. The Resurrection Encounters. In the last talk we sketched the disciples' encounters with the risen Lord. Let's contemplate these for a few moments as offering imaginative hints of what it may have been like for your loved ones as they passed through death and met the Risen Lord.
  - Mary of Magdala is wandering in darkness, lost; the empty tomb leaves her with no hope – even the body of the beloved is gone. But then she hears her name spoken so gently; she recognises the Lord and falls at his feet. She is missioned with the Good News; impossibly so for a woman in those times.
  - Are the dead woken from the sleep of death by being called by name and do they then meet the Risen One in a loving encounter?
  - The Lakeside Meal: for the disciples it has been a wasted night--no catch; symbol of the emptiness of death. Dawn breaks, and they recognise the voice, the figure, calling out across the water, 'Friends!' Something stirs in them: they come ashore to firm land. Jesus acts gently with them, using the familiar to put them at ease – fish, fire, meal, and the gentlest of all invitations, 'Come and have breakfast!' 'Bring your catch!'

- Only one demanding question is asked: 'Do you love me?' Perhaps the person you loved had problems in living lovingly? But the grains of love remain, as in Peter. Judgement is merciful; trust is restored.  
What would have been homely gestures to put your loved one at ease? The catch? The summons to breakfast? How would they have responded to the question about love?
- Emmaus: Death means one is gone from the company one knew so well. Hopes too are gone. Your loved one may have left the Church, despairing. Then a stranger comes by: intensely interested, he asks, 'What stories?' - -he interprets their lives, makes their hearts burn; recognised him at table as he breaks the bread. Life begins to stir with new hope to life. They return to the group in Jerusalem with Good news.  
Is the encounter in death an Emmaus walk, in which one's life is lovingly and sensitively reviewed and given new meaning?
- Thomas. Was your loved one a doubter? Jesus respects that, and takes Thomas gently. No scolding. 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Imagine your loved one being invited to do that!

We can humbly pray these scenes for those who have died, and for ourselves: they are stories of grace and love.

### 3. Aspects of Life after death:

Reconciliation, Justice & Purification – Given the dark side to human history and human relationships, reconciliation and Justice must be central, so that Love may be all in all. Compassion will abound as never before: 'To know all is to forgive all.' The tangle of evil and grace is unravelled. I ask and give forgiveness. The Jew's prayer in Ravensbruck concentration camp can help to expand our hearts: 'Lord, when you come into your kingdom remember the greatness which the cruelty of our enemies evoked in us, and let that be their redemption.'

Purgatory – We might name it as remedial education in loving. Our love needs such so as to enable us to breathe and grow in the atmosphere of heaven.

Prayer for the Dead? Certainly. Pope Benedict XVI tells us that time is not an issue in the world of eternity: there is no before or after: all that is spread out in time for us is together there.

The Great Homecoming of all God's family: I shall be escorted inside, to the banquet or wedding feast. Surely there will be music and dancing! Everyone will be there--all those I loved; all who have been good to me, prayed for me, wished me well, excused my failings; put themselves out to support and help me in this life. Friendships will be endlessly celebrated. Also there will be those who've caused me hurt and pain, but they will be at their radiant and lovable best now, all their negative aspects transformed. There will be no exclusive relationships, but special relationships surely are appropriately honoured.

All will be for me, and I for all, as Aquinas says. I will joy in the everlasting joy of others. I will be important, as will everyone else: all social divisions are ended; all are firstborn citizens. And as God loves all and each of us as an only child (Augustine), so we will experience intimately and personally the richness of divine love, as we are embraced by the Trinity. All will be FOR me,

Providence unveiled: God will tell the story of the world: the magnificence and audacity of the divine project will be spell-binding and breath-taking. We will fall more and more in love and appreciation of the Three who do all things well. This is the epic that gathers up all other epics. The world loves a great story that ends in success, in joy and laughter. It has been suggested that the Great Story is like a joke, which keeps us guessing and uncertain until the punchline comes, and then a roar of laughter breaks out, and the authors, the three divine Persons, take a bow.

Nothing will be omitted. As Thomas Merton says, 'Every moment and every event in every person's life plants seeds of spiritual vitality in their souls'. Now God will be seen to have been unobtrusively working in all things, and

that we had the experience but often missed the meaning. Now we see the interconnections and experience the joy of knowing what was blank mystery before, when we asked: 'How could God...?' Our hidden escorts of grace will be revealed, and how we played the same role for others. We will be grateful—and surprised--about whatever good we did. 'What each one is interiorly, face to face with God, unknown to anyone, is of vital consequence to all; and every act of love, every act of quiet adoration, every mute uplifting of the heart, draws the whole world nearer to God...' We will find that this reflection was in fact true!

There will be shocks too, about who will be first and last! It was not the powerful, the dominating, the rich, who sustained the world, but the poor and outcast, sufferers, people of humble prayer, sustained the world.

Every 'Why' will be answered – in one word! Guess what it is? Evil will be shown to have been the occasion of good, and will thus be woven into the tapestry of reality. Nothing good and loving is lost. We shall find that all reality is present to God, not just a segment. We can visit any moment in history from the beginning, as CS Lewis suggests.

The Transfiguration of the Universe. Creation will be liberated and transfigured in glory, as we will be: all will be divinised. The restoration of all things will take place – perhaps like a great work of art that was damaged but is now recast in all its beauty and wonder (Ac 1:6; 3:21). Rev 21:1-6 describes It as a new heaven and earth. God will be radiant in all things now. God is SHEER LOVE, JOY and BEAUTY. How shall we praise God?! Ours will be ecstatic joy and praise.

With our bodily glory will come the unfolding of the talents hidden in us: arts, music, pleasure, dance, creativity will flourish. We will enjoy the divine order of the universe, now complete (LS 243). With God as guide we will explore the mysteries of the outmost galaxies, as well as those of the micro-world.

Pets will surely participate in this glorification — they are so integral to human life!

‘Eternal rest’ is a poor term to indicate all of the above! It had its use as a term that brought hope to the nomadic people of God, to those overburdened with toil and suffering. Now all tears are wiped away by God, and there is no more mourning; we are immortalised, incorruptible. We are ready to explore the cosmos!

#### 4. Secret Angels

‘We believe that all the ties of friendship and affection that knit us as one throughout our lives do not unravel with death’ (Funeral Liturgy).

A reflection of John O’Donohue helps us here:

Together again: ‘Eternal life must mean that one day we will be together again with those we love, in transfigured form. We will be ourselves: we will recognize each other and will be together, reunited for eternity.’

As close as God is: ‘Much of our Christian theology has presented heaven as an idealized realm at the outposts of infinite space, as distant as possible from human imperfection. The distance also seemed to account for the absence and silence of the dead. But if we imagine heaven as a state rather than a place, we could say that heaven is as near as God; and there is nothing as close as God. Heaven is not ‘elsewhere’ – it is here, unseen, beside us.’

Loving nearness: ‘Similarly the dead are not distant or absent: they are alongside us. When we lose someone to death, they slip out of visible form into invisible presence. This alteration of form is the reason we cannot see them; but because we cannot see them does not mean that they are not there. They are transfigured into eternal form, and though they cannot reappear, they continue to be near us, and part of the healing of grief is that we can come to sense their loving nearness.’

Secret angels: ‘When we ourselves enter the eternal world and come to see our lives in full view, we may be surprised at the immense assistance and support with which our departed loved ones have accompanied every moment of our lives. In their new transfigured presence, their compassion,

understanding and love take on a divine depth, enabling them to become secret angels guiding and sheltering the unfolding of our destiny.'

- from Divine Beauty 222-223

**In the final Talk we will explore God's project for the world.**

NOTE: 'Eternal life consists in a companionship that is replete with delight, since each one will possess all good things together. They will all love one another as themselves, and therefore will rejoice in the happiness of others' goodness as their own. The joy and gladness of one will be as great as the joy of all'.

– St Thomas Aquinas: *Commentary on Apostles' Creed*, 96