

THE CHRISTIAN VISION OF LIFE AFTER DEATH

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God's Project for the World

Introductory

Resumé of previous talk: In death we meet God the Source of Life. Scriptural accounts of the disciples' experiences of encountering the risen Lord can offer hints of how it may be when we die. Reconciliation, Justice. Purification. The Great Gathering – Wedding Feast. Homecoming. Providence unveiled. Universe story. Relationship endures with those who have gone before us.

The mystery of the beyond

Big thinking now: God's project for the world – we need to think big! We will be exploring the Mystery of the Beyond, grappling with the divine imagination which is infinitely vast. Glimpses help, as when pilgrims catch sight of the Holy Mountain hidden in the clouds. Our exploration is fruitful – Vat One commends such – it speaks of gleaning what knowledge we can, and that it is 'most fruitful'.

When a power outage occurs, even a small candle helps, plus a match!

Atheists would laugh at our efforts to hint at the ultimate meaning of reality: 'What's the point of it all? There is no point. It's a foolish question' (Herbert Fingarette). Is Macbeth's line true, that ours is a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing?

Or is there solid reason to assert that ultimate intelligibility exists and that hope for the world is reasonable?

Here only a few brush-strokes can be presented, a tiny map. The exploration of the terrain awaits us; our engagement in it is what the Christian life is all about.

Two topics are chosen: firstly, God's intention, and then the issue of its success? Putting it in graffiti form: 'God is alive and well, and working on a less ambitious project'. Is this the case?

1. BHAG!

Let's begin with the BHAG. A BHAG is a Big Hairy Audacious Goal! It is a business management term from the nineties which asserts that unless firms have a big vision, they will not survive in the long run.

What is God's BHAG? That God became human so that we might become God. So says Aquinas, summing up the lengthy Christian tradition on the meaning of the Incarnation. We would now add: '... that we and all creation would become God.'

God is drawing all creation back to Godself. Hopkins puts it in a sentence: 'Thee, God, I come from / To thee go.'

Augustine's opening to his Confessions says the same thing: 'You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.'

Drawing all back in its completed form.

So we are caught up into the dynamic of returning to God. But this return means our becoming like God. And all creation is to be gathered in: 'Creation is projected to divinisation!' (LS 236). This is the dream of God, the drama of the human and cosmic story.

References occur: In the Offertory of the Mass: May we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.

In the Funeral Liturgy prayer (Canon III): 'We shall become like God, because we shall see God as God is (quoting Jn 3:1-3).'

What can that mean, to become like God? Theologians and mystics speak of the divine spark in all things, hinting at the imperishable in us. 'You shall be as gods!' becomes impossibly true (Gen 3).

What will this 'becoming' be like? God is LOVE, so to become like God is to grow in unrestricted love for all—for Godself; for others, for the good but also for the bad that they may yet be transformed; for creation.

The process is underway: We might rightly ponder, 'Why does love exist at all in our world?' St John: God is love, and everyone who lives in love lives in God and God in them.

The process occurs through our solidarity with Christ: he is the prototype, the first instance of being fully human and divine. We have alluded to 'deep incarnation' as transformative of all. In the Christian vision of things, this is the deep down movement of history, the project of the Lord of history.

We don't see results yet! But as a building site mess offers a scene of destruction and beginnings, where all is confusion, the architect and the master builders know the intention of every detail. There is the well-known story of the three workers being asked: 'What are you doing?' One replies: 'I'm chipping stones'. The second: 'I'm building a wall.' The third: 'I'm helping to construct a great cathedral!' Only at the end will all be revealed. The new heavens and earth promised in Rev 21: 1-5 are in process of being built, and we are God's work-force. The Three are totally committed, with all their resources, to the success of the project.

2. Will All Come Home at last?

What will be the outcome of the divine invitation to everyone to come to the Wedding Feast? Will ALL come home at last, every prodigal?

Everyone? 'Dare we hope that all may be saved?' is the title of a controversial book by von Balthasar. Some critics were outraged at the notion. Would you want that? Would you prefer God to be selective? But then, as in golf, you might not make the cut!

God 'so loved the world...' God is determined to save all: let me not be out of tune, exclusive. Recall Jesus who comes to heal the sick and save the lost. I must pray to love a sick and lost world so. What gets God out of bed in the mornings? Let it get me going too, in all I do and hope for.

God's invitation is extravagant, indiscriminate. Take the image of the escape from Egypt. At the Red Sea there was no divine checkpoint: all were waved across. A like attitude is shown in the feedings in the desert. God, says Jesus, sends sun and rain to good and bad, and this is what his Father is like. My compassion must match his.

As a race, we are in solidarity with the divine One, Jesus. There is one body, of which he is head, we the members. Add here our new understanding of the interconnection of all reality.

Pope Francis in *Fratelli Tutti*, 2020, says: 'No one is saved alone: we can only be saved together' (32).

We can hope for the salvation of all because of the goodness of God. God is well aware of all human failings, and God intervenes. Bad Friday becomes Good Friday because evil is embraced by divine love and goodness.; it is rendered harmless and made to serve the good. Outwardly on that Friday, the authorities got their way, but ultimately through their bad decisions it is the Father who gets his way, because the limitless expanse of God's loving forgiveness is revealed not through a kind miracle but on the Cross. The message is conveyed: God is simply loving, and not to be feared.

God is always working to bring good out of evil – R 8:28. There are no limits to grace, no limits to the extent of God's reach. The descent into Hell is an arresting image of how far Jesus will go to bring people home.

What of Sin?

For two millennia the passages in the Gospels depicting the last judgement and its consequences were taken literally. But this is all reversed in the New Catholic Catechism (1036; 1041). We are to

understand them instead as exhortations – warnings to repent, to live lovingly. Poor Michelangelo!

We need to take at face value the statement in Liturgy: ‘Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world...’ We can go also to Rom 8: ‘If God is for us, who can be against? If God acquits, who can be condemned?’ ‘Only say the world and my soul shall be healed’ -- God can do all this. Saved by solidarity.

We must catch on to the shift here from fear of eternal loss; the energy we put in the past into fixation on sin, on examination of conscience, confession, scruples is liberated. Freed from fear of eternal loss we can focus on present issues and play our part in creating the new heavens and earth. We are to be the Good News now, and become ‘the artisans of a new humanity’ (Vat 2).

‘Thy kingdom come!’ - we are to help make it happen now in our time and place; a world of solidarity, a world without marginalisation, a world of respect, sharing and inclusion; a world of forgiveness and peace-making, with everyone’s dignity respected and honoured.

Those who are with God now know what the project is, and how they were meant to play their part in it. But there are no regrets in the Communion of Saints! We all fall short, but God ignores our defects, as the Father with the Prodigal Son.

So we hope, pray, work and suffer that all may come safely home. This is the spirit of Vat II. We intercede mightily with a God to whom nothing is impossible. God is not content with a less ambitious project than complete success, with a new heavens and earth where all we be at home.

END: This is not the end but only the beginning! We have explored together in outline the Christian vision of the world to come. It brings unassailable hope in difficult times, whether due to pandemics, planetary disaster or political and economic upheavals.

We walk a world in which the Resurrection is already firmly underway. Creation, all the matter of our cosmos is, as *Laudato Si'* says, irrevocably projected to divinisation. All those we meet are destined for eternal life with us: none of them ordinary people but invited to eternal life. This gives ultimate meaning to everything.