

Heavens Above! Home Retreat for Saturday, 17th July, 2021. Fr Richard.

Come Holy Spirit ...

Heaven is where God lives. We know that from the first phrase of the Our Father: Our Father who art in heaven. But right from Genesis, the first book of the Bible, which tells us of Jacob's ladder, with angels ascending and descending from heaven, there has been a connection between our human world and God's realm. The Archangel Gabriel came from heaven to tell us that the son of God himself would come to live with us on earth.

So what did Jesus tell us about heaven? In the Gospels we read that he used all sorts of parables and images to tell us about the Kingdom of God or, as Matthew usually refers to it in his Gospel, the Kingdom of heaven. It is like a wedding feast, he says, to which many of those who have been invited do not come. It will only be at the end that we discover this, like the weeds or darnel that are pulled out only when the crop is grown or the bad fish that are thrown away only when the net is hauled in. But some will go to any lengths, will sell all that they have, in order to attain it, like a pearl of great price or treasure buried in a field. In the parable of the talents, he suggests that we need to work, with whatever gifts we have been given, in order to get there and we have to prepare for it, not like the foolish virgins who had not brought oil for their lamps. But the parable of the labourers in the vineyard indicates that we may find all sorts of people who don't seem to have done very much to deserve to be there; indeed, prostitutes and tax collectors will get there ahead of lots of people who think they should be there.

Peter should be there because he has been given the keys. And in his sermon on the mount Jesus promised that the poor in spirit and those who are persecuted will inherit the Kingdom of heaven. Children, as well as people who are child-like in their attitudes - not childish but trusting and open to new ideas - will surely be there. And, of course, Mary was assumed into heaven. So although we cannot take it for granted and not everyone who says "Lord, Lord," will enter the Kingdom of heaven, nevertheless St Paul tells us that our homeland is in heaven and Jesus, when asked where he was going, said that there is a house for each of us in heaven. However, because none of us is perfect, it does depend upon us being forgiven. And, as we are reminded at the end of the Our Father, as well as in the story Jesus told of the servant who was let off his huge debt but refused to release a colleague from a trivial debt, it requires us to forgive others as well.

Jesus does not say that it is impossible for the rich to enter heaven but he does indicate that it will be more difficult for them, perhaps because they feel independent and self-sufficient and so are less likely to have an attitude of grateful acceptance. Maybe also because those who have accumulated riches are less likely to spend all they have on the pearl of great price or the treasure in the field

When Jesus sent out his apostles he said to tell people that the Kingdom of heaven was among them. They were not just to preach this with words. They were to show that it was the case by healing and curing diseases and infirmities. Taken together with his parables of the seed that grows slowly in the ground, unseen, and the tiny seed that eventually grows into a great tree, Jesus seems to be saying that the Kingdom of heaven is already growing here on earth. In other words, what we are praying for in the phrase in the Our Father "thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven" seems to be already happening. When he is questioned about this, Jesus points to his casting out of demons as a sign that it is indeed happening: evil is being expelled from the earth. But it is a long process: Jesus says "I shall never again drink wine until the Kingdom of God comes" which indicates that it will be a time of great celebration and rejoicing.

So what will heaven actually be like? When the Sadducees asked Jesus about the widow whose seven earthly husbands had died one after the other, which man would the widow be married to in

heaven, he replied that there will be no marriage in heaven. As a celibate monk, I remember feeling quite disappointed when a retreat giver pointed out that this meant there will be no sex in heaven, if only because after the Resurrection there will be no need to reproduce the species. It is also said that, being in the presence of God in heaven, we will spend our time adoring him. I have to admit that this sounds rather a boring occupation for eternity. But I remember as a small boy watching from behind a bush my elder brother spending a whole afternoon with his girlfriend murmuring sweet nothings to each other in the garden and gazing into each other's eyes. I remember thinking then that it looked extremely boring. But they clearly didn't think so and so we may find delight in just being in the presence of God, as he continues to take delight in each one of us all the time.

Saint John Paul II said "heaven is neither an abstraction nor a physical place in the clouds, but it is a living, personal relationship with the [Holy Trinity](#). It is our meeting with the [Father](#) which takes place in the risen [Christ](#) through the communion of the [Holy Spirit](#).

When we feel that the time we spend in prayer is boring, if not a complete waste of time, all the Spiritual Masters tell us that the only true test of prayer is not how we feel, whether we feel closer to God or more holy, but that if we have regularly spent time with the Lord in prayer and if we look back over the last couple of months or so, and if we are absolutely honest with ourselves, we will find that in some area of our lives or other, we have become more generous, more tolerant, told fewer lies - we have become more Christ like. Not completely, not with everybody but we have changed, we have become more loving. Have you noticed that when we spend time with other people we sometimes unconsciously adopt some of their mannerisms or way of speaking and this what happens when we spend time with Jesus Christ.

Perhaps this is what Jesus had in mind with his images of the Kingdom of Heaven being among us, growing slowly and imperceptibly here on earth: his vision of the world coming to be the sort of place that he and his Father and his Spirit had in mind when they created the universe, and human beings in their own image: a place where everyone loves each other, everyone lives as if the other is more important than themselves, just as the Father, Son and Spirit do with each other, as well as with us. It is a slow process and, in the thirteen and a half billion years of the universe's existence, it has only been going on for a couple of thousand years so far and it is all too obvious that there is still a very long way to go but you and I are part of the process: each of us has a contribution to make. Whenever we do what we can to encourage healing, or justice or beauty; whenever you and I pay particular attention to the poor, the weak and the vulnerable, we are bringing about God's kingdom, we are continuing the process Jesus began, of building heaven on earth.

If we feel disappointed that it's not going to be ready in time for us to enjoy before we die, this is where we depend on our belief in our Resurrection, following the fact of Jesus's Resurrection. So when we die, we hope to be made comfortable in Paradise – like the good thief whom Jesus promised "This day you will be with me in Paradise" - until the time eventually comes when this world has evolved into a place fit for God as well as our risen selves to live together in for eternity.

So perhaps today you and I might think how we can make the kingdom of heaven more real in our own immediate surroundings. As with any retreat, including home retreats, that will involve some time spent in prayer, in making some time just to be with God, but it will also involve some acts of kindness, generosity, tolerance, devoting some time to others. In other words, heeding Jesus's two commandments, to love God and to love our neighbour.

Have a blessed day. Glory be to the Father ...