

The Problem of Heaven

Job 19:23-27; Psalms 17:1-9; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38

Our lectionary readings for today are full of comfort and hope for all who suffer. We struggle. Life is difficult and unjust. We're all equally human, but the rich exploit the poor, the powerful oppress the weak. Violence, or the threat of violence, looms. The Psalmist perhaps speaks for many people today: "Give heed to my cry", he implores the Lord. Protect me from "the wicked who assault me, from my deadly enemies who surround me...." (*Psalms 17: 1, 9*). Job, who you might recall is in the throes of intense, unjust suffering, anticipates his redemption in the distant future. In a staggering declaration of faith, Job says: "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth, and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side" (*Job 19*). And our Epistle also points to a future time of ultimate goodness: through Christ's love for us, he writes, we are given "eternal comfort and good hope" that we "may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (*2 Thessalonians 2:14, 16*).

Notice, then, that today's readings contrast our current suffering with our future redemption: some day, ultimately, things will be put right. Indeed, our readings encourage us to think about how *different* our lives will be when things are put right. There's a lot of biblical language to express the advent or realization of our glorious destiny: the second coming of Jesus, the day of the Lord, the new heavens and the new earth, the Kingdom of God, and heaven. These terms all point to a future so different from our current world that it's scarcely imaginable to us: a heavenly life: a world of lasting peace, justice, satisfaction, and joy.

Clearly, we are not now living in such a world. Our world is disordered by competition, strife, disappointment, envy, jealousy, anxiety, fear, depression, segregation, resentment, contempt, war. We humans compete with each other for money, resources, possessions, dominance, influence, and prestige. This

desire to be at or near the top in money, resources, possessions, dominance, influence, and prestige flows from our inner being: our fear, our pride, and our selfishness. To use the biblical language, it flows from the *heart*, the seat of our desires, values, emotions, and dispositions.

Notice, then: there is a severe *disconnect* between the way we humans are now and the way we will be in our heavenly lives. So how are *we* suited to live in *heaven*? I call this *the problem of heaven*. Many philosophers and theologians have written on *the problem of hell*. The question there is how can there be people in hell who have been created by a perfect, and perfectly loving God?¹ The problem of heaven is how can humans who are so flawed and disordered as we are be fit to live in heaven?

Heavenly life is a world of lasting peace where our deepest needs are satisfied and we flourish. This sounds attractive. We tend to think about it from our own individual perspectives: Great, everything's going to be great for *me* in heaven. Sign me up! But, the reality is that heaven's going to be great for *everyone* in the heavenly realm. But, how could that be, given that many people oppose what I stand for, and I oppose what many other people stand for?

When I was a teenager, old enough to pay attention to the sermons preached in my church—this would have been in the late 1970s or early 80s—I once heard a preacher scandalize some of the congregation by pointing out that we better get ready because heaven is going to include people from all over the world. There will be people from every country in heaven, every skin color, and every walk of life. So, a lot of people we don't like or mix with are going to be in heaven. To drive his point home to the entirely white, southern congregation that day, he leaned into the mic and said: "Yes, friends. There are going to be a lot of black folks in heaven, and even communist Russians".

Today we're embarrassed and offended by the cultural context that motivated this preacher to say those words. Nevertheless, the point he was making was biblical and theologically sound: "And I," Jesus said, "when I am

¹ See footnote 3 for the gist of my view on the problem of hell.

lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (*John* 12:32). How many people? *All* people. That’s what I call a high percentage.

Let me put this into perspective in our current cultural context: to all of you who support the Democratic Party, there are going to be a lot of Republicans in Heaven. And to my Republican friends, especially those in the MAGA movement (some of whom on my social media feeds have been referring to Democrats as “demons” and “morons”), I have some hard news for you: there are going to be a *lot* of Democrats in Heaven.

The problem of Heaven is this: how are we, with all our factions and strife, fit and prepared to live in a world where Republicans and Democrats welcome each other as brothers and sisters in peace? Where Jews and Arabs are friends? Where the Hutu and the Tutsi joyfully break bread together?

How do we get there? Some say it’s simple: just say the right prayer or get baptized, and you’re good to go. We live in a ruined, fallen world. Don’t worry about it. Just have love for Jesus in your heart and you’re fine. We need not worry about the world’s injustice, the poor, the homeless, the marginalized, because the world as it is now really doesn’t matter. As Jesus said, “you will always have the poor among you” (*Matthew* 26:11). So just get right with Jesus and you’re good.²

I don’t think these folks have thought through their position. The attitude seems to be: we don’t need to be worried or overly concerned about our fellow humans. We just need to believe the right things, speak out for Jesus, and have warm feelings for him. But, how, pray tell, will mere beliefs and thankful feelings toward Jesus for letting you into heaven *prepare* you to live with people you actually avoid or loathe or hate? To put this into theological terms, I’m not talking about *salvation*; getting into heaven isn’t the problem. I’m talking about *sanctification*: the problem is *happily living* in heaven.

² This is not a straw man. I’ve seen it multiple times on social media, where it has been used as a rationalization for the MAGA movement and its support of the current president.

My hunch is that most people think, if they think about it at all, that either most of the people they loathe or hate are not going to be in Heaven, or they think that God is going to zap people to magically make everyone in Heaven peaceable and friendly.

There are two reasons to reject this perspective: one I've already mentioned: Jesus will draw all people to himself. So, you should expect there to be a lot of people in heaven whom you detest right now or frighten you right now.³ How are you going to live peaceably with them?

Is it that, upon entering heaven, God zaps us to make us peaceable and sociable? We're told by St. Paul that our heavenly bodies will be transformed, imperishable bodies, and in our gospel reading today Jesus says that there won't be marriage in heaven.⁴ So apparently there is going to be some substantial physical zapping. But, will the zapping extend to our *minds* as well? And if so, is this zapping going to make everyone else agree with *you*, or is it going to make you agree with everyone else? For us all to get along, something's got to give, right? Surely only a very few people's minds—the ones whose hearts and minds really are already righteous—would not be radically changed by this divine mind-zapping. The rest of us—most of us—would need a very severe mind-zapping, which is to say, a radical changing.

But, there's the problem. If God zaps you to radically alter your values, desires, emotions, and dispositions, then God would be changing you into someone who is not *you*. You are a self-conscious, intelligent being with free will and a measure of autonomy. You can over time develop new habits, dispositions, values, and desires, but for these to be your own, you must exercise some control over them. So, if God just zaps you to make you morally perfect, then how would the resulting person be *you*?

³ I agree with C.S. Lewis that "the gates of Hell are locked from the inside" (*The Problem of Pain*); that is, only those who will insist throughout time not to submit to God's lordship will never be in Heaven, not because God wills it, but because they really, ultimately do not want to live under God's lordship. I'm doubtful that there are very many people like that (and I hope that there are none).

⁴ See *Luke* 20-34-36.

For a near perfect analogy, check out the first episode of the science fiction tv show on Apple TV called *Pluribus*. In *Pluribus* something like a very fast-acting virus infects almost everyone on earth. In a matter of minutes, it transforms everyone it infects into a happy, cooperative group of people. We see this through the eyes of the uninfected protagonist, who watches in devastated horror as everyone around her becomes someone they were not just moments before. If this sounds like a horror story to you, then it illustrates how the divine zapping idea would violate our autonomy.

Perhaps instead we could think of heaven as a place where everyone shows up with their various prejudices, disordered values, and selfish desires, but when anybody in heaven is about to do something unjust to another person, God restrains that person, forcing them not to do anything bad. Maybe that's how God will assure that heaven remains a peaceable, just kingdom. This is what lots of people in history have wanted God to be like: a powerful enforcer Zeus. I don't know about you, but this strikes me as intolerable. It brings up images of Darth Vader crushing people in submission to his will. Do you really think heaven is going to be governed by a Darth Vader for justice?

No. For us to be fit to live in a peaceable world of justice, love, and mutual respect, we will need to become the kind of persons who are prepared to live happily in a society with lots of people that we currently disapprove of. We need, to use Jesus's phrase, to become *pure in heart* (*Matthew* 5:8). This coming to be pure in heart must be accomplished not against your will, but with it. It will be achieved with God's help, no doubt, but not by God's simply imposing the divine will upon you. It will be a process running through your own autonomy.⁵

So, what's the upshot of all this? What might we glean from today's lectionary readings to apply to ourselves right now? Here's what I think:

⁵ Since many people die before their characters have been sufficiently transformed to live happily in heaven, I think it very likely that there is something like Purgatory, an afterlife situation in which those who have died can be purified in a way that does not violate their free will and autonomy. There might be no limit to how long it might take for any particular person.

reflection on how different we'll need to be to enjoy a heavenly life can help us make sense of the biblical teachings about how we should live now.

As Christians we say we are followers of Jesus. Why? Because we trust Jesus, and he told us to follow him. Jesus made it clear what this means: healing the sick of body, soul, and spirit; liberating prisoners; feeding, clothing, and sheltering the poor; providing justice for the marginalized and the oppressed; teaching people to recognize and to love the beautiful, the true, and the good. Inviting everyone to the heavenly banquet. So we know what we're supposed to be doing. And each of us has some sense of the gifts and skills we possess. We need actively to look for opportunities to follow Jesus by using our gifts and skills where they will promote the good.

Something marvelous happens when we follow Jesus by obeying him. Because this work is focused outwardly in benefitting others, it naturally develops a sense of sympathy and compassion for others. As we collaborate with others, as we get personally involved with them, we can't help but see their humanity, their needs, their struggles, their desires, their successes, their failures, their hopes and dreams. Have you ever had one of those moments when you're really with someone, and all of a sudden you get an overwhelming sense of their preciousness? When we follow Jesus by obeying him we learn by experience to see others more like we see ourselves. And as we get better and better at loving our neighbors as ourselves, we will find ourselves exhibiting what St. Paul calls *the fruits of the spirit*: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). And these, my friends, are the very traits that fit us for living in the kingdom of heaven.

As a final observation, let me point out that our current cultural moment provides an excellent opportunity for us to follow Jesus. Our current government has turned its back on the poor, the sick, and the marginalized, has ended programs that were providing life-saving medicines to millions of people around the world, has routinely violated long-standing rules of law that

promote justice for the poor and marginalized, and now threatens to reduce social security, medical research, and health insurance for millions.

As Christians, we can no longer sit back, confident that our tax dollars will do the work that Jesus has called us to do. We have the opportunity now to step into this breach and do the work ourselves. This work will be costly. It will cost us money, time, and energy. It will require sacrifice and some suffering. The work will be messy. It will be hard. Our own government may oppose and oppress us. But, that just is the way of Jesus. Some of you know exactly what I'm talking about, because you're doing this work already. But, many of us—myself included—really need to get involved. Some questions we might ask ourselves: Do I really need all the money I have, or can I give some of it, perhaps much of it, to those in need? Can I spare or sacrifice some time to research already existing programs that I might contribute time and work for? Am I being called to use my own talents and skills to start something myself?

The future is open. The decisions and the actions we take today will steer, for better or for worse, the course of the future. In giving ourselves in service we can become coworkers with God,⁶ working out our salvation,⁷ and in the process be transformed, in keeping with our own autonomy, into the likeness of Christ,⁸ and thus we'll become prepared to live with countless others in a heavenly world of lasting peace, mutual support, and love.

⁶ See *1 Corinthians* 3:9.

⁷ See *Philippians* 2:12.

⁸ See *2 Corinthians* 3:18.