

## **HEAVEN AND HELL week three Lent course**

**Paul Crossley**

Last week we established that a loving and creating God, who called us into being (with what dread?) and then redeemed us with the sacrifice of himself, could not allow our lives to end at physical death. Having created us, he could not discard us on the scrap heap of nothingness, and then callously create more of us, only to dole out the same oblivion. Such a disregard for us as individual souls would be wholly incompatible with the idea of a loving and personal God, and with the plan which God must have conceived for us all. So what will confront us at the moment that we step through that mysterious portal? What plan does God have for us? What kind of after life can we expect?

The answer to these questions can only be shaped by our experiences of this world; and in that sense any statements are bound to be inadequate. How can we employ concepts used in our world of time and space and causality to explain a world with no time, no space, no material phenomena?. And yet, although we have no experience of the after life, are we really without any knowledge of it at all? I think not. Putting aside the out-of-body and paranormal experiences I discussed last week, it is still possible to make hypotheses about the nature of the next world deduced from the central assumption - the ground of our faith - that God created us for a purpose, as part of a plan we will never fully understand, but which we sense at the deepest level of our being. And in that divine purpose is the hope and the

possibility self- transformation. Who would ever think, said my dear history teacher at school, that a bug in a chrysalis would become a butterfly? To those who asked Paul about the exact nature of the after-life he replied, in I Corinthians, 15: Don't ask stupid questions, such as :‘How are the dead raised?’ and ‘what sort of body do they have when they come back’? What is sown, Paul says, is not what is to come: ‘The body is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonour; it is raised in glory: it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body’.

But Paul's proper warning not to make the after-life too like our own cannot be strictly adhered to. As St Augustine remarked, death is as much about the living as the dead. We have to make the after-life in our own image. Into our world of time and place we need to translate the untranslatable; to give terrestrial shape to the ingredients of the next world. Three of its constituents loom large in Christian teaching: Judgement, Heaven and Hell. All three took concrete and recognizable shapes. Heaven and Hell had to acquire their own distinct geography, and to become physical regions or territories; Judgement had to be shown as an extension of human judgement - as if we were being ushered into the court room of a king. After all, a basic function of a Hebrew king was that of judgement, and Christ was aptly called the King of Righteousness. The scriptural sources for the proper image of the Last Judgement were there for all to see . St John's vision of God, face to face, was described in Revelations 4: ‘One sitting on the throne’, a rainbow encircling him, surrounded by the symbols of the evangelists, the lion, the bull,

the man and the eagle, and by the 24 elders. Such is the God of the central portal at **Chartres** cathedral, west front. The second most obvious scriptural image of the Last Things comes from Matthew 25, where we find Judgement in full force. . He starts with the parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins , some prepared for the 'bridegroom' (Christ on judgement day) with lamps full of oil, some having squandered their lamps on idle pleasures. The Lord 'shall come in glory', and sit 'upon the throne of his glory', dividing 'the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left'. Saying to the latter: 'depart from me ye cursed into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and all his angels... and these shall go away into everlasting punishment, and the righteous into life eternal. '

Matthew's vivid image became the stock in trade of medieval portal sculpture. The Last Judgement, or (less often) the Throne of God in Revelations, led to the paradise of the church within. **Autun. Compare to St Denis.**

These portals show two kinds of Judgement distinguished by the medieval theologian. The first - more personal - is the Particular Judgement - the judgement of the individual soul at the moment of death. Here intercessionary prayer, from the saints, and from those particularly close to Christ, St John and the Virgin, is vital for the soul's entrance to heaven. **Chartres Last Judgement Portal, south transept.** . The second - more cosmic - is the Last Judgement, when the world will end, and the bodies of all will emerge from their tombs. Souls in paradise will be reunited with their bodies in all their original and youthful beauty. This final judgement is shown, alongside the

particular Judgement, in many portals, including Chartres'. From the judge the portals fan out their figures into images of heaven and hell. The stark, dual, choice - eternal torment or eternal bliss - , is made clearer in the binary composition of all these portals , with God in the centre, St Michael weighing the souls beneath him, and the damned and the saved arranged to the left and right of this dominant axis. **Describe the Chartres Judgement Portal.**

This dualistic clash of two simple opposites lies at the heart of the medieval view of death, one instigated by Jesus himself : 'behold I have set before you life and death, therefore choose life'. We take the road of either good or evil. For the evil there is hell, the dark place which succeeds the Greek Hades. It also combines the Jewish Old Testament's *Sheol* (the pit of darkness) with the Jewish *Gehenna* (the place of punishment). In the Christian imagination hell is a place separated from all other regions by a 'great gulf fixed'. Christ's parable in Luke 16:19- defines picturesquely the geography and nature of hell. Dives, the rich man, feasting, and Lazarus the beggar at his gate, eating the crumbs from his table, his sores licked by the dogs. On his death, Lazarus was carried up to heaven to 'the bosom of Abraham' (**see Chartres portal**), while Dives , on his death, was sent to hell, there to suffer the 'agony of these flames'. He begs Abraham to send Lazarus with just a drop of water to cool his tongue. Abraham refuses, reminding him that on earth he had enjoyed good things while Lazarus had suffered misery. In any case, he says, between us and you a 'great gulf' has been fixed' to stop anyone crossing from our side to yours, or from your side to ours. The road to heaven and hell has one-way traffic only; no one can return from either.

The Christian hell developed its own sado-masochistic logic as it moved through the Middle Ages. Matthew, 13:49 referred to hell as the place where the wicked shall be 'cast into the furnace of fire, there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth'. Hell was the domain of the rebel angels who because of their pride fell in tandem with the Fall of Man at the Creation, or at the start of time (Isaiah, 14:12; 2 Peter 2:4. . Hell, like Heaven, was a place. Dante's monumental late 13<sup>th</sup>-century trilogy, the *Divine Comedy*, plotted its geography in its first volume: the *Inferno*. Just as his Italian contemporaries laid out their great towns in neat parcels of streets and quarters (**Florence aerial view**) each corresponding to a specialized trade or calling, so Dante imagined hell as a vast circular city of pain, divided into circles, inhabited by sinners according to their grades of sin - the worst at the very bottom, the least evil towards the top. Dante approached this world with his guide, Vergil, as through a real landscape, in this case a dark wood. The *Inferno* begins with lines of memorable concreteness and economy:

*Halfway along our journey to life's end*

*I found myself astray in a dark wood*

*(Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*

*mi ritrovai per una selva oscura*

In these fetid and stinking circles the punishments are endless, as all is endless, for Hell, like Heaven, is a static place, outside time: it does not evolve or change; one is trapped here forever, with no hope of redemption. Hell's tortures are described by medieval theologians in terms of absolute pain - a pain that could not be worse: utter darkness, vile smells, endless

noise, and, above all, excruciating fire. But there is also mental pain here: for the pain of the damned, what the medieval theologians called the *Poenam damni*, was compounded by the ever present realization that - like Dives - the soul was eternally cut off from God. The Dives parable is given vivid moralizing force in the sculptures of the porch at **Moissac** in south western France. Beneath a terrifying image of the Apocalyptic God, the Dives scenes unfold on the door jambs: **Describe**

This is the place, as Isaiah said, 'where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched (66:24). Hell is usually telegraphed in the Middle Ages as a vast devil's mouth, modelled on the devouring mouth of the monster Leviathan in Job 41, into which the damned are pitch-forked by demons. But not all depictions of Hell are so schematic. On the contrary, the imagination of the artist was positively stimulated by hell's curious and varied subject matter: its repulsiveness, obscenity, and ghoulish popularity. It invited a kind of perverse invention. Hell scenes are usually far more interesting in medieval art than scenes of the blessed in heaven, who seem to be wrapped in a kind of aesthetic numbness. If the elect enjoyed a uniform, collective joy, the damned by contrast suffered in very particular and ingenious ways. In his monumental Last Judgement altarpiece which he painted for the hospital at **Beaune** (in Burgundy) in around 1445, Rogier van der Weyden created a painted version of the great Gothic portals, and set it in a chapel at the end of a long infirmary hall. There the ill and the dying could contemplate it in all its flaming glory, and could concentrate on the need for penitence at the moment of their death. Rogier's psychology is penetrating. The damned,

rising from their tombs, are driven to hell not by demons (as was the usual custom) but by a knowledge of their own guilt, their expressions running an extraordinary gamut between fear, desperation, panic and horror. But no artist captured this precise world of physical and mental torture more ghoulishly and mysteriously than Hieronymus Bosch (c. 1450-1516), a strange loner, an eccentric intellectual, conversant with a wide range of religious, astrological, astronomical and travel writing. His most famous painting, now called '**The Garden of Earthly Delights**', takes a painstaking pleasure in cataloguing the lusts and follies of mankind. The amorous and curiously perverted naked men and women of the central panel of the triptych find their punishments in a hell that is truly visionary. Like a bad drug trip it shows all manner of illicit pleasures twisted into their appropriate tortures: crucifixions on enlarged stringed instruments, bodies skewered and pierced, obscene couplings of demons and young women, gigantic enlargements of human body parts suffering the butcher's knife - all presided over by the ghastly flames of the city of Hell.

Heaven, by contrast, invites less fantasy. Like Hell, it is a place, the Elysium of the Greeks translated into the Beatific vision of God. Like Hell it is eternal and therefore without change, though it varied its image in medieval art. For the 12<sup>th</sup> century the Beatific Vision, the endless adoration of God, was given visual form in the hierarchies of angelic beings that surrounded the throne of God in circles of light: Seraphim Cherubim, Dominions, Powers etc, the 9 Orders of Angels discussed by Denis the Areopagite in his 6<sup>th</sup> century treatise on the Heavenly hierarchy (**Dore?**) . These circles of light-filled beings

surround the Judging Christ on many Gothic church portals (**Notre Dame, Last Judgement/ or Chartres judgement portal**). This was not the only image of heaven. The term 'Paradise' , originally from Persian and Hebrew, meant a walled garden, and by the end of the Middle Ages it had come to mean two variations on this theme: the earthly paradise of Eden (in the East) and the celestial 'Edenic' Paradise of Heaven. That is why some later medieval views of Heaven show it as a flowering garden. But the most popular form for Heaven was not just a representation of a place, fictional or real, but a place itself - a church. More than any other image of heaven, the medieval church, shimmering with mosaics and stained glass, embellished with all manner of precious shrines, gilded and bejewelled statues and reliquaries, was the closest thing the medieval viewer came to his or her image of Heaven. As John put it in Revelations 21: 'And I , John, saw the great city, the Holy Jerusalem, descending out of Heaven from God, having the glory of God... and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal... and the building of the wall of it was of jasper, and the city was pure gold, like unto clear glass. And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones. '

This is the image of heaven shown in the mosaics over the chancel arch of **St Maria Maggiore** in Rome, or the **Sainte-Chapelle in Paris** , or - most literally - the chunks of precious stones that decorated the 'foundations' of the walls of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Holy Cross chapel at **Karlstein** castle, just outside Prague. If pictures of hell were deterrents to the faithful, these great buildings, shimmering with coloured glass, were statements of the medieval incentive system at its most splendid. This was your reward for avoiding sin and



embracing virtue - precisely all those theological and cardinal virtues that greeted the pilgrim at the portals of these cathedrals (**Virtues and Vices, Notre Dame in Paris**).

But this map of the after life has so far failed to point to a third state of experience. The dualities of Heaven and Hell have crowded out an intermediary zone, which seems to combine aspects of the other two : Purgatory. It has ancient origins, via Origen and Clement of Alexandria in the 4<sup>th</sup> century to pre-Christian Judaism (Macabees, 12, 43-5). Purgatory is the place of 'purgation', where those not deserving of hell, but not yet prepared for heaven wait in suffering but in hope, for once refined by purgatorial fires the soul can enter heaven. For the theologically tidy-minded Purgatory is a difficult concept. As a place, does it belong in the lower reaches of heaven or the upper echelons of hell? Being a state of transition it is subject to change, and therefore belongs neither to hell or heaven, which are absolute, unchanging states of being. It may be because of these ambiguities that the Christian church has rarely given the image of purgatory any clearly defined shape or unambiguous context. Its most famous formulation was Dante's in his second volume of the *Divine Comedy, Purgatorio* (**Domenico di Michelino, Florence cathedral, 1465, Dante**). He described it as an arduous ascent of a seven -storied mountain, with each climbing sinner purging his or her soul from their special form of weakness. Thus the proud bent double under the weight of the stones they carry, the gluttonous look up to the luscious fruit of exotic trees, but tantalizingly are never able to reach and pick it, etc (**Flaxman**). Other images show it like hell, with much fire, but

with souls looking upwards or escaping to heaven carried by angels. The physical mortifications of Purgatory are not permanent, nor cut off from God. The torments are merely instruments in an authentic and interior struggle of the soul to attain a state of perfection. There is pain but also hope. In **Enguerrand Quarton's Coronation of the Virgin (1453-4)**, Hell and Purgatory occupy a real landscape, hell (as in the Rabbinic Jewish *gehenna*) lies under Jerusalem, and Purgatory under Rome (as the contract for the painting specified).

To us, these literal geographies of the after life may seem crudely anthropomorphic. We know that the after life - as a supernatural state - has no real 'places' to go to. We may also be deeply sceptical of the theology that has accumulated around the 'Last Things': Heaven, Hell, Judgement, and Purgatory. Are they not elaborate theological constructions foisted on us by the institutions of the Church, often for the lowest of motives: to inspire fear, to keep us in line? If so, it is not working now. We are no longer frightened, as the medievals were, by images of hellish furnaces and faintly ridiculous devils. At worst, these pictures are the projections of a perverse imagination; at best they are only symbols - crude and literal paraphrases - of states of being of which we can have little understanding. 'Little understanding', yes, but not 'no understanding'. The states of being we have described are accessible to our reason, provided that our reasoning is based on the fundamental premise of a loving and personal God, to whose scheme of salvation we belong. For example, Judgement for all of us, must take place, or the idea of a just God would be unsustainable. The inequalities, injustices,

cruelties meted out to the poor, the bereaved, the misunderstood, the suffering in this world have to be redressed in the next if God loves us. Does that mean that Hell, for those who have been especially evil, is the just punishment? This I find impossible to believe on grounds of scripture and of theological ethics. Hell has had a particular hold over the sado-masochistic imagination of the Christian church, since its earliest beginnings. Theologians counted how long one side of your body would be burned (20 million years) before you were, like an overcooked roast on a spit, turned over on to your other side to be roasted for similar aeons. I remember priests at my school reading, with some relish, the terrifying picture of hell given to young Daedalus by a Jesuit priest in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. It still makes me blanch slightly. It also makes me angry. For the definition of Hell, as a place of eternal torment, is the fantasy of a diseased imagination. The idea that we, as finite beings, committing finite sins with - whatever their terrible extent - a finite set of consequences can be punished for those sins *for infinity*, is a grotesque distortion of God's loving justice, of Christ as the Good Shepherd. . No human crime or evil, however great, could ever proportionally deserve the absolute and eternal punishments of hell. It goes against all ethical principles. I sometimes think, at this point, of those horrendous newsreel images of Allied soldiers in the last war discovering those emaciated bodies piled on top of each other in the Death Camps of Nazi Germany. How uncannily they mirror the piles of naked, suffering souls in our images of Hell. The Nazis did indeed create a Hell on earth; Auschwitz was justly called the 'arsehole of the world' - just as Hell was often depicted as a giant devil farting out souls from its hideous bottom. But not even the

sadists of the Concentration camps deserve the eternal and absolute pain of the Christian Hell. Hell is therefore banished from my cosmology of the next world.

But what of heaven? Famously, in 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul gives us hope of the Beatific Vision, the vision of God: 'now we see through a glass darkly, but then we shall see 'face to face'. Not surprisingly this vision is poorly represented in medieval art (though Joany will have more exciting Baroque images of the *visio beatifica* next week). Ideas of heaven can inspire the most pathetically sweet bathos. I remember an obituary notice in the East Grinstead observer: 'The Angels' trumpets sounded/ The heavenly voice said 'come'/ The pearly gates swung open/ And in walked - Mum'. And the beatific vision is difficult to convey in either words or images. It may even seem a little passive, even a bit boring, sitting for ever around the throne of God, singing his praises. As Machiavelli put it sardonically in his *The Ass*, heaven might have the edge in climate, but hell can offer more interesting company.

Milton's God in *Paradise Lost* is far less interesting than his Satan. To imagine heaven is, almost by definition, impossible. We have to think here not of images or places but of states of mind or feeling. I see it as a continually more ecstatic self-surrender, allied with delight, as lovers delight selflessly in each other. I see it too as being in a kind of eternal present, where the past is brought together in a single eternal moment. . Our earthly time is like a line or string, moving from one thing to the next; heavenly time is 'thick' time, where we will be able to do all things, and know all things, simultaneously : a sort of supernatural multi-tasking. Our closest human parallel is memory, which

allows us to extract sensations from the past and recall them, almost simultaneously. Memory can re-play sensations outside time, or at least outside the time in which the moment memorized took place. Memory can also overcome matter by resurrecting sensations without recalling the physical states in which those sensations were embedded. I can remember the exhilaration of hitting a 6 in cricket without remembering the position of my hands or the stance of my feet. In all this memory resembles resurrection: it raises dead and past sensations from the grave, and gives them new life. And like the Resurrection of the Dead, memory transfigures and glorifies what it recalls. How many times have we looked back on our past and seen it in a new light? Not just the light of nostalgia but the light of mature understanding, when, as adults, we return to the past and see it for the first time.

Wordsworth's landscapes of his childhood, 'apparelled in celestial light' may not have been so radiant in the past, when they were present to him, as in the remembered past. After all, the best poetry, for Wordsworth was - in his own words - 'recollection in tranquility'. And because the blessed in heaven partake of God's all-knowing nature, these memories will not be private; they will be shared by all, and with particular loving communion by those dear to us in this world. . It is this instant and total recollection between all the blessed, especially among those we have loved on earth, which constitutes my particular approximation of what the Beatific Vision will be.

But all that sounds elevated far above my present chaotic and imperfect spiritual state. We are all fallen creatures. However selflessly we have led our lives we are surely never so spotless as to be admitted to paradise

immediately. Saints we are not - and in any case saints are not epitomes of perfection. That is why of all the three states of the after-life Purgatory is the one I feel most comfortable in. Purgatory belongs to our earthly world far more than to the heavenly: it is a place of striving, growing, evolving, hoping. It is the Holy Saturday between the Hell of Good Friday and the Heaven of Easter day. It is what my conscience and my understanding requires me to believe in. When the soul came 'face to face' with the Throne of God in Cardinal Newman's *Dream of Gerontius*, he simply called out: 'take me away'. We are not worthy. Our souls *demand* Purgatory. I am a kind of moral tramp. If a kind organizer of the Hollywood Oscars invited me to walk the red carpet and then attend the prize-giving dinner in the great hall dressed as I was, I might look at my shabby clothes and refuse. 'Oh no, he would say 'I know your breath smells, and your clothes are torn, and you are filthy from your hair to your feet, but never mind, we are charitable here and want to welcome you as you are.' I would say - we all would say - 'if you don't mind, I'll just go and clean myself up'. 'But that may hurt you', the organizer would say'. 'Never mind', I would reply, 'it is right that I should change, and there is no gain without pain'. Purification almost always involves suffering, except that in Purgatory the suffering is not the purpose of the purgation (as in Hell), it is its instrument.

Describing Purgatory in this way is another way of describing our life on earth. In both realms we are dealing not with absolute states of being (Heaven or Hell) but with processes of moral and spiritual evolution, with struggle, choice, conflict, the exercise of free will, and with the sense, beyond these vales of

tears, of God's loving presence. This makes me wonder. Are we not, actually now, in Purgatory? Could it be that what we think of as Earth is in fact Purgatory - the place or state given over to the long, painful pilgrimage to Heaven? Although I find the idea of re-incarnation deeply problematic, I wonder if my world now is not the partner of many other Purgatorial worlds which in a long past I have struggled in, but have now forgotten. (This idea is evocatively voiced in Geddes MacGregor's book *Images of After Life*).

Purgatory would thus be not just this world, but a series of worlds from each of which the soul would learn something of the nature of the spiritual dimension of existence and by discipline and God's love have his faults rooted out and supplanted with more benign dispositions. We are all in a painful classroom learning to hear the music of the spheres, except that we have been in a number of schools, progressing from the 1st to the 6<sup>th</sup> Form, from the cacophonies of the toddlers' orchestra to the Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, and all of us dreaming of a place in the Berlin Philharmonic. There is something deeply sympathetic in our belonging to this Purgatorial world. God gave us Free Will and a conscience to chose good or evil, Him or ourselves. The struggle enobles us in a way that the blissful passivity of the Blessed in Heaven can never emulate. There God's love is something wholly understood, here it comes to us filtered through temptation and failure. But in that restless pilgrimage our moral choices, allied to God's mercy, make our spiritual diseases curable. Purgatory reminds us that evil is not terminal, and that what distinguishes us as God's children - gives us our humanity - is the struggle, what I would call the heroic.

No poet put this heroism of our condition, pulled between good and evil, more powerfully than the Orkney poet Edwin Muir (1887-1959). . In his poem, *One Foot in Eden*, Muir stands, on sinful, earthly soil, but with one foot still in paradise, elevated by the image of Eden, an Eden lost to us by sin, but still remembered as our true home. Muir stands in a transitional world, an inextricable melange of good and bad, of weakness and strength, of folly and wickedness. But from that impure intermixture comes qualities - Muir suggests - which the absolute bliss of Heaven can never know: pity, hope, faith, and merciful love (Christ's as much as our own). It is a Purgatorial Poem which reminds us that our fallen state is an heroic one, and that we belong, eventually, in Heaven.