

ONE of the big problems with talking about Heaven and Hell is that language is limited: those writing in biblical times, as well as in more modern terms needed to use metaphor to explain what they mean. Our problem today is that some of the ancient metaphors have been lost in translation; and without the help of a Tardis there is little that we can do rectify this situation. Sometimes, a beginning is to realise that metaphors are being used. Indeed, most of us realise that there are times when words are monochrome (black and white) and what we are trying to describe is far more colourful. On Saturday 3 December 2011, a number of footballers in the United Kingdom pointed to the sky when they scored a goal in memory of the late Gary Speed, manager of the Welsh national football team. I do not suppose that all who did so believed in heaven being literally above; I wonder why we want to automatically assume that the biblical writers did so?

A related problem when faced with the topic of heaven and hell is the thorny issue of what heaven and hell are for. This leads us more particularly to questions, usually in relation to hell, that begin with 'who', 'what' and 'why'.

However, let us begin with the issue of Heaven. Eugene Petersen in his book, *Reversed Thunder* writes:

Many people want to go to heaven the way they want to go to Florida—they think the weather will be an improvement and the people decent. But the biblical heaven is not a nice environment far removed from the stress of hard city life. It is the invasion of the city by the City. We enter heaven not by escaping what we don't like, but by the sanctification of the place in which God has placed us.

What Petersen means, I think, is that heaven is not to be detached from earth in the way that most of us have begun to think; for the biblical worldview is quite clear about one thing: heaven and earth

are intertwined. This is the thrust behind one of the phrases in the Lord's Prayer: 'your kingdom come, your will be done; on earth as it is in heaven'.

Encounters with the heavenly realm in the biblical stories nearly always lead to life-changing events. This is true of prophets such as Daniel, Isaiah and Ezekiel. It is certainly the case with the author of the Revelation. For the author of the Revelation is certain that heaven will invade earth. Earth will have little to fear if this only means an invasion of harp playing and rest. This might be different if heaven is a place where the sovereignty of God is exercised in its fullness. Heaven then is as much to do with the present reality as it is with a future event or what happens beyond physical death.

Let us turn for a moment to the subject of hell. Images such as fire and brimstone, bizarre creatures with pokers and the tune and laughter associated with Radio 4's Old Harry's Game spring to my mind as I type. Both Paula Gooder and Tom Wright are undoubtedly correct when they say that the biblical writers were hesitant about talking about hell; although the biblical narrative does as whole does move towards the idea of a place or space where God is absent; and those who repeatedly reject God are sent. Here again, I want with Tom Wright to express caution; and also agree that all rejection of God begins with idolatry. Here I do not mean bowing down and worshipping images made of stone and wood; but of putting anything other God upon the divine throne. Idolatry is subtle. Lots of people who are in any form of leadership flirt with it, often unknowingly. A good friend of mine used to say that he was at his most vulnerable when he had preached a wonderful sermon or led a particular event well; at that moment, he could feel the ease with which he was grasping praise that belonged to God. It would seem that following a particular route will end in a particular way. Talk of hell must be tempered with ideas of mercy, grace and love; but to

suggest that there are no consequences for actions is to diminish mercy, grace and love.

Do I think that there will be a separation akin to the separation of the sheep and the goats? The answer would be a hesitant 'yes'. However, I would go to say that the far biggest challenge is to ask questions like; 'how should heaven influence earth' and 'what does it mean for the kingdom to come'?

Our answers to such questions – and our responses - may at the end be far more challenging than queries about the existence of hell and who might be sent there.

For information about the comedy programme: *Old Harry's Game*; see

http://www.comedy.co.uk/guide/radio/old_harrys_game/about/

Further reading:

E Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination* (New York: Harper Collins; 1991)

C Rowland, *Revelation*, (London: Epworth, 1993) 74

Advent 2011



Theological Reflection

Heaven and Hell