

Passion Sunday 2014

Ezekiel 37 vv 1-14 p868, Psalm 130, Romans 8 vv 6-11 p1134, John 11 vv 1-45 p1077

Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life; he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this? (John 11^{25&26}).

A parody of the address at too many funerals: *Fred was a pretty decent sort of chap and, if there is a heaven, God will welcome him in with open arms.* This is a parody because it implies an inadequate idea of heaven, an inadequate concept of God and an inadequate understanding of what it is to be a human being.

Let's deal with heaven first. Too many people seem to imagine heaven as a continuation of life pretty much as it is on earth. The Egyptians filled their pyramids with the bits and pieces Pharaoh might need in the next world – tools, weapons, eating utensils, slaves even. Coming up to date, I recently heard it suggested at a funeral that the reason why the deceased had died suddenly and prematurely was that God had a vacancy in the celestial darts team which needed filling. Quoting Monday's *Times*, "A new survey of 2,000 adults has found that 55% believe in the supernatural, compared with 49% who believe in "a God". Many believed in psychic healing, telepathy, astrology, ghosts and demons." Only 6% of the population regularly attend church. The article is headlined, *We want morality-free, godless religion.* 'Twas ever thus! Human beings are naturally religious. We want the comforts of religion. We enjoy the rituals of religion – at least at critical times in our lives. What we do not want are the obligations of religion, the implications of believing in a God of justice and mercy for our own every day behaviour. Secular naming ceremonies are provided for non-believers in place of baptism. Civil marriages become ever more elaborate as couples demand something more than the drawing up of a legal contract, but are reluctant to recognise that their wedding takes place in the context of God's plan for our lives. Humanist funerals enable families to celebrate the life of the deceased without any question of accountability for the way they have lived. 'Twas ever thus. If you read the Old Testament, the familiar refrain of the prophets is not that there is too little religion. On the contrary, there was too much religion in ancient Israel – religion of the wrong sort – just as there is too much of the wrong sort of religion in modern England. We want the comforts of religion and its comforting rituals; we do not want a religion that turns our world upside down, a God Who demands that we live impeccably righteous lives, a Saviour Who tells us that we must take up our crosses and follow Him, a Spirit Who is grieved, when we are not *kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you.* (Ephesians 4³²).

An adequate vision of heaven, then? Not a celestial version of Pharaoh's palace; you would have to go for Las Vegas for that. Not a souped up Cuxton Social Club, where the beer is free and there is no closing time. What is heaven like? Jesus told Nicodemus, *If I have told you of earthly things, and ye believe not, how shall ye believe if I tell you of heavenly things?* (John 3¹²). We can't know what heaven is like. We'll just have to wait and see. Heaven is beyond our imagining. All we can know about heaven is that it is infinitely better than the best we can imagine on earth. So let's not limit our vision of heaven, nor its significance.

Our concept of God. Any concept we might have of God would be an image and therefore forbidden by the second commandment. God tells Moses, *I am that I am* (Exodus 3¹⁴). I

have just been inspired by reading a very good book by a great Christian thinker. In fact it has helped to inspire this sermon. But there is one sentence in the book which was absolutely and completely wrong. I don't think the author could have left it in the book if he had thought about it. He said that the Athanasian Creed provided us with the best possible definition of God. Now the Athanasian Creed is extremely good and it states very well some of what we Christians effectively must believe about God, but it does not define God. God cannot be defined. A definition is a limit, but God is unlimited. He is infinite. He is Sovereign. He is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. He is the Creator of all that is. He is the One Who is in Himself. He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *O holy, blessed, and glorious Trinity, three Persons and one God: have mercy upon us miserable sinners.* He is the Redeemer, the Saviour. He is the one Who sanctifies. *Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.* (Hebrews 11³). *He is, and he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.* (Hebrews 11⁶). *All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity.* (Isaiah 40¹⁷). *Yet, God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish, but have everlasting life.* (John 3¹⁶). *God is love.* (I John 4⁸). No, the Athanasian Creed cannot define God. God cannot be defined. Like the other creeds of the Church, the Athanasian Creed points us towards an understanding of the nature of God. It can do no more. You can find it if you wish in your 1662 prayer book after Evening Prayer, under the heading, *At Morning Prayer, Quicumque Vult*, which are the first two words of the mediaeval Latin and are used as a title in the English translation – like *Te Deum Laudamus, Benedictus, Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis* and *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*.

Familiar prayers, too, point us in the right direction if we wish to deepen our understanding of what it is possible for human beings to know of God. *“O Lord our heavenly Father, high and mighty, King of kings, Lord of lords, the only Ruler of princes, who dost from thy throne behold all the dwellers upon earth” “ Almighty and everlasting God, who alone workest great marvels.” “ O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom” “ O God, from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works do proceed.” “O God, whose nature and property is ever to have mercy and to forgive.” “ O God, the Creator and Preserver of all mankind”*

This is your God! He is not some kindly old gentleman who will welcome Fred into his club because he is a decent chap. This sovereign God is the God of Justice and we wouldn't have it any other way, when you come to think about it. Should a Hitler or a Stalin get away with his crimes? Should any of the perpetrators of evil get away with it? Is there no redress for the human victims of human iniquity? Can we get away with riding roughshod over other people? Don't our actions have consequences? Of course they do. We are all answerable for our lives. We shall all stand before the judgment seat of God and have to give an account to Him for the way we have lived. There are only two alternatives – two possibilities for the way we shall spend eternity. Either we shall dwell forever in the presence of God, Who is Sovereign, the Creator and Sustainer of all that is, (*God is good, God is truth, God is beauty, praise Him*), God Who is both just and merciful, or we shall not. Two possibilities, two choices, life and death. It is our choice.

An adequate understanding of what it is to be a human being? *Fred was a pretty decent sort of chap and, if there is a heaven, God will welcome him in with open arms.* I think we credit one another with both too much and too little. We judge ourselves and we judge one another by standards which are both too low and too high. Even by the standards of this world, there are very few people who are consistently decent. People gossip. They tell lies. They drink too much. They cheat on their wives or husbands. They treat work colleagues shabbily. They are complicit in exploiting the naivety of their firms' customers. We have a saying, *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*, which means don't speak ill of the dead. If we didn't have such a custom, if we told the whole story of the life of any one of us in a funeral oration, it is unlikely that we could say that Fred (or you or I) was a consistently decent chap, even by this world's standards. If we relied on the fact that we are decent people to get into heaven, I think it would be a minority who made it.

Our standard is too low – common decency – and still there are probably very few people who measure up to it. What ought our standard to be? What is it really to be a good human being? It is to be like Jesus. It is to live up to the fact that we are made in the image of God, Who is love. It is to behave as the children of God. It is to love God with all our hearts and to love our neighbours as ourselves. It is to keep God's commandments. An ordinary decent person would be fair. He would be good to his family. He would be kind to the people who were kind to him. He would lend a hand in the expectation of being helped back. But he might well dislike people who didn't like him. He probably wouldn't lend again to someone who didn't pay him back. He might hate someone who really hurt him or his family. It is hard enough to attain to that standard of ordinary decency, and we would probably be self-satisfied if we consistently kept to those principles, but ordinary decency is not sufficient for the disciples of Jesus, for human beings made in the image of God, for the brothers and sisters of Christ, for people who together make up the Temple of the Holy Spirit. What God demands of us and of all humanity is that we live up to our calling as the children of God. *But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.* (Matthew 5⁴⁴⁻⁴⁸). That is the standard by which we are judged. That is what is required of those who are to spend eternity in the presence of the thrice holy God. Anything less is sin and *the wages of sin is death.*

Eternal life is the gift of God. What it cost Him was the death of His Son. Today is Passion Sunday, when we remember that Jesus was betrayed, mocked, tormented, flogged and crucified for us. This is what it costs God to make us fit to stand in His Presence and serve Him. *Fred was a pretty decent sort of chap and, if there is a heaven, God will welcome him in with open arms.* No that isn't how it works. The Sovereign Lord is the God of Justice and Mercy. He demands the highest standards of those who are to be His children. He is the God of love and He Himself pays the price of our redemption. *He died to make us good.* Righteousness is imputed to us in Christ. The old prayer is quite correct. *We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws.*

We have left undone the things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us. We depend entirely on God's promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesu our Lord. We depend entirely on Him and He is entirely dependable. We don't stand before God on the basis that we are decent enough people by human standards. We stand before God as forgiven sinners. We stand before God in Christ Jesus our Lord. It follows that we seek to be perfect not because we think we can justify ourselves or because we are afraid of the consequences of our sins. We seek to keep His commandments because we love Him. *He died to make us good.* It is by His grace that we may be good. Walking by the Spirit on earth, we glimpse heaven. *For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.* This is the Spirit of him that raised up Christ from the dead [who] shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you. It is God Himself, and only God, Who can and will cause us to dwell in His presence in all eternity, in the Heaven whose joys are beyond our imagining, as the people we were always meant to be. I don't rely on the hope that whoever takes my funeral might grant me a pass on the scale of human decency. I know that what I deserve is death. What I rely on is the fact that *the gift of God is eternal life*, the gift of God in Christ Jesus my Lord.