

Is there life after death? By Rev John A. Castle

A sermon given on 6<sup>th</sup> November 2016 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings Job 19:23-27a, **Luke 20:27-38** (Year C, 3<sup>rd</sup> before Advent)

Introduction: soliloquy from Hamlet, Act III Scene 1<sup>1</sup>

To be, or not to be: that is the question.  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer 64  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them. To die; to sleep;  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end 68  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die; to sleep;—  
To sleep? Perchance to dream! Ay, there's the rub; 7  
72  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,  
When we have shuffl'd off this mortal coil, 8  
Must give us pause. There's the respect  
That makes calamity of so long life. 76  
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of dispriz'd 9 love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office and the spurns 80  
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,  
When he himself might his quietus 10 make  
With a bare bodkin? 11 Who would fardels 12 bear,  
To grunt and sweat under a weary life, 84  
But that the dread of something after death,  
The undiscovered country from whose bourn 13  
No traveller returns, puzzles the will  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have 88  
Than fly to others that we know not of?  
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all...

“To be or not to be, that is the question.” Thus begins perhaps the most famous soliloquy in literature, so well known that it is even quoted in a Star Trek film, translated into Klingon (it comes out as "taH pagh taHbe). The name of the film, also known as Star Trek 6, is *The Undiscovered Country*, itself a quotation from this same soliloquy. But whereas in the film the “undiscovered country” refers to the future, in Hamlet it most definitely refers to death, and in the soliloquy Hamlet is musing on the benefits or otherwise of suicide. Death might seem to be the ideal escape from “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune”, but the uncertainty of what lies ahead in the undiscovered country of death may make us think twice. “To sleep? Perchance to dream! Ay, there's the rub; For in that sleep of death what dreams may come, When we have shuffl'd off this mortal coil, Must give us pause”.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bartleby.com/46/2/31.html>

## **The Undiscovered Country**

My subject today is that undiscovered country, and my title is "Is there life after death?" This season in the church's year, between All Saints (which was last Tuesday) and Advent, has become known as the "Kingdom Season" (hence the red altar cloths), and has a particular focus on remembering the departed. Last Sunday we held our Memorial Service, Tuesday was the feast of All Saints, Wednesday All Souls, next Sunday in Remembrance Sunday.

Death and what comes after it is not the most popular topic for small-talk. We will all have lost someone close to us, and the memories of that may be painful. In addition, in our culture we really don't like facing the fact that we are going to die. Life is about staying young, keeping healthy, enjoying the moment. Death is treated as if it's the ultimate failure, the worst possible scenario. Billions of pounds are invested in keeping people alive, and we hope against hope that some new treatment will be discovered that will cure this or that terminal illness. I have not counted the number of funerals I have conducted in the past 21 years of ordained ministry, but it must be at least 300. Only in a very few cases have I been called to visit a person before they die, but when I have, the courage and realism that is expressed has usually made a big difference to the dying person and their close relatives.

### **My Father**

Last Sunday was the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of my father's funeral. Dad was not what you'd call a religious man. He described himself as an agnostic. But he was happy that we prayed for him during his battle with cancer and before his death. He was, I believe, open-minded about what would happen after death. And for all his lack of certainty he faced the news that the cancer was incurable with pragmatism and courage. He was open with the members of his Probus club and the choir that he belonged to. The day before he died we had all gone home after a final weekend which I and my 2 brothers and our families had spent with Mum and Dad. We'd said our goodbyes. We didn't, of course, know that he would die the next day, but it was, as far as our family was concerned, pretty much as good an end as we could have hoped for. His local vicar came to the house before the end and said final prayers. We planned the funeral, I led the first part and preached (at Dad's request) and then stepped down to join the family while the vicar ended the service.

You might say we were fortunate, and we were. Not everyone has the luxury of experiencing the good things we did. But I do believe we all have some choices about how we face death and loss. At my father's funeral I used the well-known quote from Benjamin Franklin: "in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes". Many people go to considerable lengths to arrange their financial affairs to minimise the taxes they have to pay, so that when the tax bill comes they can meet it with some degree of equanimity. Wouldn't it be a great idea to give at least as much thought and preparation to our own deaths?

### **Is death the end?**

One thing we can do right now is to face this question about whether death is the end. If we believe in the Christian faith, this is where the rubber hits the road. If there is no God, then we're all in the soup. But if God is real, and is at all like the God that Jesus spoke about, there is hope for us all. And if there *is* hope for us all, then we can afford to bring our fears about death out of the closet and apply a bit of reason to them.

There is quite a lot about death and eternal life in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament. It wasn't always the case that the Jews believed in life after death. In the Psalms and elsewhere in the Old Testament there is mention of a place called "Sheol", which was a place of shadows and joylessness. Sheol was under the ground, and the word could also be used as a synonym for the grave. Belief in a final resurrection of the righteous and judgment for the wicked developed later, but was commonly held by the time of Jesus. There isn't time now to go into questions of heaven and hell, except to say that both feature in the teaching of Jesus, and that the purpose of Jesus' incarnation, atoning death and resurrection was to reconcile human beings to God and give us life with him for ever.

The passage we heard from the book of Job certainly shows Job holding on to a belief that he will finally get to see God, but the original Hebrew text is too unclear for this passage to be used as a proof text for resurrection.

But if you want to know whether Jesus believed in an afterlife, today's reading from the Gospel of Luke is about as clear as it gets. Let's spend a few moments seeing what Jesus had to say. But I warn you, Jesus' description of life in heaven, if that's what we should call it, isn't quite what you might expect.

It's interesting to read the context for this teaching. The Sadducees were a religious party made up mainly of priests. They only held the first 5 books of the Bible, believed to be written by Moses, to have binding divine authority, and they didn't see any reference to life after death there. Knowing that Jesus does believe in life after death, they set out to trick him by telling a hypothetical story about a woman who was married in turn to 7 brothers, had no children by any of them, and then died. Then comes the punchline - "In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her" (Luke 20:33).

The Sadducees really think they've got Jesus in a corner. The idea that the woman would have to be shared by all 7 brothers in the afterlife seems so laughable that it couldn't possibly be the sort of thing that God would intend. So the resurrection of the dead is obviously nonsense.

Jesus, of course, is completely unfazed by their little story and its implications. When he answers their question he seems to speak as someone who really knows what he's talking about. It's almost as if he's been to heaven and knows exactly what it is like. This is what he says:

*Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die any more, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. (Luke 20:34-36 NRSV).*

### **What is heaven like?**

The Sadducees' big mistake was that they imagined that life in heaven would have to be just like life on earth, with the same kinds of relationships. And a lot of people today fall into the same trap. If you ask a random sample of people what they think heaven is like, assuming they believe in it, you are going to get a lot of answers that are basically people imagining the best kind of life they could have on earth and then adding some magic. For the keen golfer it would be an amazing green where they get a hole-in-one every time. For the chocolate lover it will be having the most amazing variety of delicious chocolates that you can keep on eating without ever being sick. For the jihadist it will be having 70 virgins at your disposal.

Jesus' few words about heaven raise the tone above all that. Heaven, he says, is where we will know that we are children of God. We will be like the glorious spiritual beings whom God created to live with him for ever. Marriage, on the other hand, is a gift for life on earth - one of its functions being procreation which is necessary to keep alive the human race which is made up of creatures who are destined to die. Eternal life in heaven is different altogether, and much more glorious.

And Jesus goes on to give an insider's perspective on a well-known story from the book of Exodus in which God describes himself as *the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob (20:37)*. Why would God describe himself as God of dead people, Jesus implies. *Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive (20:38)*.

But is there any proof? Shakespeare's Hamlet speaks of death as "The undiscovered country from whose bourn No traveller returns". If no one has come back from the dead to tell us that there is a heaven, or what it is like, how can we know it is true?

Well, there is plenty of recent evidence that there is life beyond death. The most compelling to me is the testimony of people who have had near-death experiences. There are websites dedicated to this. There are books by people who have been clinically dead and returned to tell the tale. 2 recent

examples are *Proof of Heaven* by Dr Eben Alexander, an American neuroscientist who had an amazing out-of-body experience while brain-dead.<sup>2</sup> Another is *Heaven is for Real* by Todd Burpo, whose 3-year-old son Colton had a near-death experience and was able to talk about his unborn sister who had been miscarried by his mother and give details of a great-grandfather who had died 30 years before Colton was born<sup>3</sup>.

### **Someone who came back**

I'll leave it to you to investigate this evidence further if you wish. But for me the most conclusive evidence is from one person who definitely did come back, not from a near-death experience, but from death itself. Jesus Christ definitely died from being crucified by an experienced execution squad on Good Friday. The following Sunday his tomb was empty and his followers, who were initially upset and sceptical, began to report that they had seen him alive. They went on to proclaim a message about his death and resurrection which they were prepared to die for, and which has convinced millions down the centuries, not least because through this message lives and communities have been changed for good.

If any of this is true, we have every reason to get our fears about death and what comes afterwards out into the open, to talk about our hopes for our loved ones and for ourselves, and to face our own mortality with dignity and peace. In Jesus' words, *God is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.*

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2 <http://www.ebenalexander.com/>

3 <http://www.heavenlive.org/>