

I wonder what you imagine when I say the word 'heaven.' Lots of white and gold? Angels? Harps? Clouds? It's not something that we talk much about now – I think most of us prefer to leave 'heaven', like 'life after death' in the realm of mystery and not to attach too much imagery to it. The concept of heaven has taken a battering in our scientific world, where only the things that we can touch and measure count for anything. And when the church leans on the idea of heaven, we're looked on as either using childish carrot and stick methods to control behaviour, or taking refuge in a comforting delusion, refusing to deal with this world as it is.

The church has been rightly criticised for being so focused on a heavenly life 'somewhere else', that we have failed to take care of life here on this earth. We have neglected the call to serve the poor and distressed, to seek peace and justice, and steward our precious environment, in favour of saving souls for some mystical otherworld where everything will turn out okay without us having to work at it. The knife edge we must walk, then, is to affirm how good and important and central this world is, while still holding on to the deep truth that the world (as we know it) is not the only reality there is.

Our Scripture today focuses on a moment when that 'other' reality breaks in and when Peter, John and James experience a vision of the glorified Jesus. The epistle writer emphatically points to this moment to say "we're not just making this stuff up. We saw with our own eyes that there was more to Jesus than being a rabbi and a healer. This 'thing' happened, where he was transfigured in front of our eyes. We heard the voice from heaven."

It was crucially important to the Apostles to say that they were witnesses of more than good works. *They were witnesses of a mystery where a whole other dimension of existence – the reality of heaven – turned up inside this world.* Jesus' transfiguration was a moment when something 'other', something beautiful, indescribable, and glorious became visible to the ordinary eye.

In that moment, two spheres of reality were present in the same moment – the disciples walked up the mountain with Jesus the man, but they walked back down the mountain having seen Jesus the Eternal One, the cosmic and glorified Christ. They had glimpsed heaven.

What can we say about this now? How does this touch our lives?

This story tells us that this other realm, this space we call ‘heaven’ is real. And while there’s not a lot we can say for sure about what it’s like, we have enough in our Scriptures to tell us that heaven *is our truest home*. It is the realm where everything good, everything beautiful, is most fully itself, and *where we are most fully ourselves as we are meant to be*. It is where God’s love is present to all without obstacle or barrier. Heaven is full union with God, being taken into the heart of God.

It’s important to know that this realm is not far away, and it’s not something that we only get to participate in when we die. Jeffrey Burton Russell describes it by saying that ‘heaven is neither the original Eden nor the kingdom of God within us nor a paradise at the end of the world, *but all three*. And the time frame it occupies is not the future or even infinity, but an *enveloping eternity* in which Christians already participate...’¹ What the disciples learned on the holy mountain is that, in prayer, and through Jesus as the key or portal, heaven is right here, right now, simply unseen most of the time.

This is especially so in the Eucharist, when we gather at the table and sing the eternal song ‘holy, holy, holy’. We join with the whole communion of saints past, present and future, and we are tasting heaven. Jesus is with us – this time not in shining robes on a hillside, but in bread and wine, and in the gathered ones around his table.

But it is also true at other times, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear. One of the key verses in our gospel today is this: “Now Peter and his companions were weighed down with sleep; but since they had stayed awake, they saw his glory and the two men who stood with him.”

The theme of being asleep or awake runs through the gospels. In the crucial moment when Jesus wrestles with God’s will in Gethsemane, his friends are unable to stay awake, and cannot support him with their prayer.

¹ referenced in a Time article by David Van Biema called ‘Does Heaven Exist?’ from March 1997. Emphases mine.

But in today's story, even though they are deeply tired, they have committed themselves to prayer, and in this place of awakeness they are gifted the vision that will sustain their faith even to their own deaths.

There is so much in this life that sabotages our ability to 'watch and pray', to stay awake to the realm of heaven that surrounds us in each moment. The key temptation that we all face in our spiritual lives, is the temptation to sleepwalk through our lives – to fill them with numbing activity, escape or distraction, instead of tuning in to the realm of heaven that sits waiting to break in and reveal the presence of God.

What is sleep for you? While I have various strategies for relaxing through escapist TV or facebook, the real sleep state in my life is when I convince myself that I'm too busy to pray. When the first thing I feel compelled to do in my day is check my email, rather than align my heart and mind to the reality of God's compassion holding my life. It might be different for you. Maybe you sleep by always being with other people, making sure you're never alone and silent in God's company. Maybe your sleep is that without realising it, you've taken on the worldview that there's no more to reality than what you can normally sense or understand, so you've closed off the possibility of heaven as irrational. Or maybe you've taken refuge in thoughts and beliefs that satisfied you five, or ten, or thirty years ago, as a substitute for a living, growing relationship with God.

Whatever these sleep-inducing thoughts and habits are for us, their effect is to dull us, to place a barrier between ourselves and the shimmering moments when heaven comes near, in daily life.

The writer of 2 Peter asks us to 'be attentive' to the nearness of heaven, and the divine presence of Jesus 'as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.' This beautiful image of the star rising in our hearts makes me think of the way Jesus' own life lives in us. In prayer, we open ourselves more and more to his love and presence, and so his dazzling glory grows in us until we are revealed in our fullness as children of God.

The message of the Transfiguration is this: if we are faithful in bringing ourselves to the kind of prayer that opens our hearts to God's love, to the eucharist, and to seeking the presence of God in our everyday lives, then we will glimpse heaven. The heaven that embraces and envelops and surrounds us and our whole world, in every moment. And these glimpses will recall us to our true selves, and our true home, from which we are called to live out our days.