

Life that goes on

Forever



If you have ever been to a Catholic funeral (a 'Requiem Mass') you may have noticed that, despite the sadness of the occasion, there is a definite note of hope that carries through the prayers and rituals of the ceremony. While the funeral is a public sign of the end of someone's life on this earth, in a deeper sense it celebrates the deceased person's birth into a new life: eternal life with God. This future hope in a life after death, which has inspired the earthly lives of Christians from generation to generation, is not something the Church can prove or even describe in any concrete detail. Rather, it arises from a conviction of faith: our belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

By dying and rising again, Jesus has brought us into the 'fullness of life'. His love unlocks our true selves and frees us to be the people God has created us to be. Because of the limitations of our humanity, however, this life cannot be fully realised in this world. We, like Jesus, are destined to enter into a new life beyond the confines of our earthly existence; a life of union with God that goes on forever. This union is what Christians mean by 'heaven'. The shared happiness of those who enjoy this perfect fulfilment is what we refer to as 'the communion of saints'. (See leaflet 15)

Since God has created us to be free, this eternal destiny is not one that is forced upon us. With absolute respect for the human will, God allows us to choose. We can either welcome or reject this gift of eternal life. Everyone who sincerely accepts and lives the message of Jesus (even if implicitly, as in the case of those who have not had the opportunity consciously to embrace Christianity), welcomes this gift. But we are also free to say 'no', to ignore Christ altogether, and to choose to live apart from God, not only in this world but in the next. This is essentially what Christians mean by 'hell': life lived apart

Eternal Life

ENQUIRY

Approaching the Topic

One of the hardest hitting facts about this life is that it doesn't go on forever. We are not immortals. We die. Sooner or later each of us has to face this inevitable conclusion of our human existence. For most of us death is a scary – perhaps even terrifying – prospect. It seems so final, invincible, beyond the control of any human power. And yet, what if ... (dare we believe it) ... death isn't the end? Could life beyond the grave be possible? A life of perfect joy? A life that somehow makes sense of the many 'senseless' dramas of our human existence? Imagine if... What if...?

It is in the face of all such hesitations, that Christians boldly affirm the promise of eternal life. Yes! Christ has conquered death... we will live with God forever!

from God.

Of course, we cannot equate either heaven or hell with a concrete place in time and space. In speaking of realities beyond this world, we are dependent on symbols and analogies to describe what 'no eye has seen, nor ears heard, nor the heart of man conceived' (2 Cor 2.9). The bible uses many vivid images and metaphors to describe heaven and hell. While we should recognise that such images can express powerful truths about this afterlife, we must be wary about attaching to them too literal an interpretation.

What do Catholics mean by 'purgatory'?

If heaven is our eternal union with God, and hell is our eternal separation from God, what then do Catholics mean by 'purgatory'? In the past, this term popularly conjured up scenes of a half-way house between heaven and hell, where punishment for past sins had to be endured before the deceased were ready to enter heaven. Perhaps in reaction against such negative connotations, many Catholics have dropped 'purgatory' from their vocabulary altogether. While understandable, neither reaction seems appropriate. In actual fact,

God of all consolation,
in your unending love and
mercy for us
you turn the darkness of
death
into the dawn of new life...
May we go forward eagerly
to meet Christ,
and after our life on earth
be reunited with our
brothers and sisters
where every tear with be
wiped away.

(a prayer from the Rite of Funerals)

purgatory adds a liberating dimension to our faith when correctly understood. Let's explore this further...

When love hurts...

Have you ever had a moment of revelation, when you looked into the face of someone special and realised, perhaps for the first time, just how much they love you? Of course you may have taken this love for granted all along, but now the truth of it suddenly hits you between the eyes! Deep within, you are filled with a realisation that you are loved – passionately, totally, unconditionally.

This realisation is wonderful! Freeing! And yet, paradoxically, it can also be painful as you think back on all the times you took this person for granted; the time lost on misconstrued priorities; the things you could have said and done... Such remorse usually takes time to work through before we can really be at peace with ourselves and our new-found beloved. It is not that the other person is punishing us. Rather, we have to come to terms with our own lovability, to forgive ourselves, before we can fully respond with the love we want to give in return. If our hearts are so disposed, this process happens quickly. However, if we have built up a lifetime of unforgiving habits, this change of heart will not come so easily. In fact, if we are chronically unforgiving, we may never be able to respond.

By way of analogy, we can view the 'judgement' of God as a bit like this. We must all be called to account at the end of earthly lives. But this judgement is not like a trial in a court of Laws. Rather, it is seeing our true selves through the eyes of God's love, which overwhelms us when we come face to face with Christ after

A sacrament of healing

When a Catholic is very sick, the Church anoints the person with oil in a special ritual of healing called the Anointing of the Sick. This rite is one of the seven sacraments of the Church, and is part of our way of continuing the healing ministry of Jesus. The healing offered by this anointing is forgiveness of sins, hope and inner peace, sometimes physical healing, and an assurance of God's steadfast care, even in death. In the past, this sacrament was often kept strictly for those close to death. A priest approaching the bedside for an anointing was all a patient needed to know about the latest prognosis! However, in more recent years the Church has encouraged greater use of this sacrament for illnesses in need of healing but not necessarily life-threatening. As with all the sacraments, this anointing has significance for the whole Church community. It reminds us of our call to wholeness. It deepens our awareness of our call to be a sign of salvation to the world. Wherever there is brokenness, we are to be instruments of Christ's healing touch.

death. Of course, we probably knew of Jesus all along, but now there is no hiding from him, no ignoring him. The human facades and defences that we adopted through life are useless now. Christ embraces everything about us. We see the eternal joy that is being held out to us, and yet we experience the remorse of our unworthiness of such a gift. To accept our unworthiness and welcome Christ is to embrace heaven! By refusing to face our true selves we keep ourselves separated from Christ... hell! The 'gap' between our willingness to open ourselves fully to God's all-consuming love and the process of surrendering our resistances is what the Catholic concept of 'purgatory' is getting at. It is our final path to liberation, a process of purification which completes all that is unfinished in us. So, the 'pain' of purgatory is actually an experience of intense love; cleansing us and making us whole.

A Story

A magnificent send-off

Our school principal was a much loved and respected member of the local Catholic community. The news of her cancer hit us hard. We were shocked at the rapid deterioration of her health. For a while I felt numb with anger. How senseless that this gifted and energetic woman should die now! Her funeral was an event which will remain in my Catholic memory banks for years to come. The Church was packed with wall-to-wall people. The ceremony was rich and uplifting. You could feel the whole congregation lifting her up to God. Afterwards, a guard of honour of school students lined the street. Despite the sadness of the situation, there was also a great feeling of victory. Back at the school hall afterwards, the atmosphere was abuzz with stories and memories – happy and poignant, funny and serious – of how this wonderful woman had touched our lives. I felt my anger thawing into the beginnings of new hope. No, death is not the end. The saints – like Sr Helen – live on in heaven. (Kris)



Since our love of God is always connected with our love of our neighbours, we may also conclude that, as purgatory draws us towards the fullness of union with God, it also draws us into union with God's people. You may be aware of the Catholic practice of 'praying for the dead'. It is our sense of being one body in Christ, across heaven and earth, that inspires this practice. We believe that our prayers, even across the grave, can help each other.

Yesterday... today... tomorrow

By now you will probably have deduced that, while we Christians look forward to life after death, we recognise that our earthly life is relevant to our future existence. What we are becoming now as human persons has bearing on what we will become in the future life. There is an essential thread of continuity between the living and the dead, between the community of pilgrims here on earth and the perfected 'communion of saints' that rejoices with God in eternity. Together, we are 'growing into' the

body of Christ.

You have probably heard people say 'It was heaven' to describe a scene of great beauty and peace. On the other hand, the phrase 'He was in a living hell' may describe someone caught in a destructive situation. Despite their often flippant usage, such phrases remind us that even on this earth we see reflections of the afterlife. Whether it be in the eager innocence of a two year old's face or the crumbling of the Berlin wall, we can see reflections of the wholeness and unity that heaven promises us. In the ugly scowl of a selfish face and the crippling isolation possible in a consumerist society, we can glimpse the threat of hell. In the embrace of a couple as they work through a rocky period in their marriage, and in the peace talks between warring nations, we can glimpse the cleansing experience of purgatory. While all these are merely imperfect images of what is beyond human comprehension, they nonetheless challenge Christians to live with an awareness of their eternal destiny.

Among the skeptics, talk of heaven and hell sometimes raises the accusation that Christianity is 'pie in the sky'; a panacea for life's harsh realities. Nothing could be further from the truth. While Christians have faith in a kingdom that is not of this world, this does not excuse them from facing the issues that confront them human race in our present age. The 'now' of life is where God's saving power is already at work, and where individuals, households and nations, are already making significant choices in response. Wherever people are liberated from oppressive forces, be they spiritual, political, psychological or socio-economic, the in-breaking of God's kingdom is at work. The reign of God touches insistently upon each day of our lives, demanding a

The Scripture Story

The story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead (John 11.1-44) is both ordinary and dramatic. On the one hand we read about two sisters grieving the death of their brother. Jesus, too, is moved with grief. We also read of an awesome display of God's power: Lazarus is called back to life! Perhaps the most important point of this Gospel is that it calls us to take a bold step in faith. Jesus says:

'I am the resurrection; whoever believes in me, though he dies, shall live. Whoever is alive by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?'

Reflect upon this scripture passage during the week, asking yourself Jesus' question: 'Do you believe this?'

response. In this light, Christians are called to be intimately concerned with the issue of our age.

The Grand Final of grand finals!

While we are conscious of the beginnings of salvation on earth, and while we believe in our own heavenly destiny, Christians also look forward to the greatest day of all: when Christ will return in glory at the end of time, bringing the whole world and all things to completion. This day of salvation is like the Grand Final of all grand finals! We hear it spoken of again and again in the old Testament writings (for example, see the prophet Isaiah's magnificent vision of peace in Isaiah 2.1-5). The early Christians, too, were keenly sensitive to the 'end times' (referred to as the 'parousia'). They recognise that Christ's coming has already triggered the unfolding of this great day, and that he would come again to bring all things to their ultimate fulfilment. In the lofty vision of St John we read, 'Then I saw a new



heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth has passed away... The One seated on the throne said, 'See, I make all things new' (Revelation 21.1, 5)

Two thousand years later we continue to look forward to the Last Day. While we know that the hour cannot be predicted, we believe in faith that Christ will return in glory to judge the living and the dead. We also believe that the Gospel warnings, to be prepared and watchful for the coming of the Lord, are as pertinent today as they were to our ancestors in faith. It would be foolish to front up to play a grand final without being fit and well-trained. Likewise, as Christians, we strive to live each day with hearts and minds that are forever alert to welcome the presence of God.

Your Story

Think About It

- What are you most grateful for about your life?
- What has been your closest experience of death? Eg. a near-death experience, the death of a relative. Describe some of your reactions connected with this experience. How has it affected your own life to date?
- What are your thoughts about heaven and hell?
- Some people have experienced a 'living hell'. Others have had experiences which might be described as 'heavenly'. Many people have had both! What about you?
- Have you ever been to a Catholic funeral? If so, describe any elements of Catholic ritual and symbolism which made an impression. What inner reactions were evoked?

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