

The 'Last Things': Heaven, Hell and Purgatory



On this day each year, we observe All Souls' Day and pray for all the faithful departed. Jesuit theologian, Jose Giménez discusses concepts of heaven, hell and purgatory, which are often brought to mind on this occasion but can be so difficult to talk about meaningfully. What form can our discourse about these eschatological topics take?

What is the best way to talk of heaven, hell and purgatory, the 'classical' topics of eschatology? This is an area that makes us aware, sometimes painfully so, of the radical inadequacy of human language. These are topics that we cannot treat without having 'anticipatory experiences' of them.

Speaking of hell...

Is hell just and necessary? Theology claims to be doxological speech about God, that is, speech which gives praise to God. But when we speak of hell, does not our speech become an irreverent and blasphemous discourse, attributing to God ways of acting that negate his love and mercy? Is it possible? Won't speaking about hell lead us into blind alleys and into quandaries that are difficult (if not impossible) to solve? When speaking of hell, the gospels keep repeating the expression, '...where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth'. Such weeping and gnashing of teeth make it difficult for us to articulate even a minimally comprehensible discourse about this topic.

What hell is not

Nevertheless, we must talk about it. For a long time the Church in its pastoral work has placed too

much (sometimes, nearly exclusive) stress on this topic, thus generating a 'religion of fear and terror'. Basic responsibility and honesty require us to clear up misunderstandings that have done so much harm and to put things in their proper place.

First of all, let us say that hell is not a 'positive' act, in the sense of something positively desired by God. It is not a creation of God, a place established to punish the wicked. If hell were that, then it would call God's justice seriously into question. Hell would mean condemning non-eternal beings to eternal punishment for non-eternal actions. Not only would God's justice be called into question, so would his mercy. All this is so clearly evident that we need not go into further arguments: the punishments of hell would not, shall we say, be a good 'letter of introduction' for divine mercy.

In the 'prayer for the conversion of the gentiles' that Saint Francis Xavier composed, we read: 'Eternal God, creator of all things, ... Behold, Lord, how to thy dishonour hell is daily replenished with [the souls of the infidels]...' Hell is truly an insult to God.[1] Like the ancient prophet of Israel, Xavier seems to be telling his God, in a final, supreme effort to convince him, 'If you don't do it for us, then at least do it for the honour of Your Name' (cf. Ezekiel 36:22) – since he was convinced that, when all is said and done, the honour of God's Name (his very reality) and the good of what has been created by God are one and the same thing.

The impossible negativity

If hell is not a creation of God, and if only God can create, then we must conclude that hell can be characterised only by its negativity. Properly speaking, hell is not. In fact, the New Testament, in speaking of the fires of hell, gives us an image of a conflagration that consumes everything, reducing it to nothing. Hell would be that nothing. But it would have an important characteristic: the nothing of hell would not be the desirable, attractive nothing of post-modern nihilism (a sort of analgesic that saves us the unspeakable suffering of not having been able to live the life of God); rather, it would be a nothing 'that hurts', as fire does. For indeed the biblical revelation is all about fostering life, not nothingness. Hell, therefore, would be an 'anti-Genesis', a creation story in reverse.

All this puts us back at the original starting point of everything. And that is precisely where our language about hell gives us problems, for we simply cannot place ourselves at that starting point. We know that God creates freely, and we know that this freedom of God is the freedom of One who gives himself in Love. In God, freedom (as absolute as it may claim to be) and love (as weak and limited as it may seem) embrace one another. Our own freedom, in contrast, is a freedom 'in the making': it is not absolute; it is not capable of opting between being and not being. And when it tries to do so, that

is, when it tries to become absolute and closes itself off, then human liberty is capable of ‘creating hells’ in this history of ours: a world of victims and villains, separated by an unbreachable abyss (Luke 16:26).

Contrary to what Sartre says, hell is not other people; rather, it is oneself, closed off to others. Indeed, other people are the possibility of my reaching heaven. This is what grounds the ‘legitimacy’ of our discourse about hell: it shows us that ours is a ‘graced freedom’ and that, when that is forgotten, it can ‘create hells’, which are translated into the suffering and pain of innocent people. Such discourse also gains legitimacy by reminding us that the much-desired reconciliation of opposed principles (between justice and mercy, for example, or between God’s universal will to save and our freedom to frustrate that will) is a permanent task which, when all is said and done, we can receive only as Gift.

He descended into hell

Despite all we have said so far, Christians proclaim faith in a God who does not abandon any of his creatures, a God so wildly in love that he goes in search of the ‘lost sheep’, leaving the others behind in the fold (Luke 15:3-7). Our God is not a wrathful deity, who takes pleasure in discharging his rage upon the sinner; he is rather the Lamb who bears and, by bearing, takes away the sin of the world.[2] Ours is a God who descended into hell... For this reason, his love always wins out.

... But speaking especially of heaven

If there is anywhere where we feel particularly pained at the incapacity of human language to communicate what ‘eye has not seen nor ear heard’ and ‘what God has prepared for those he loves’, it is in trying to speak of heaven. Spanish-speakers will be familiar with the scornful way that the phrase *musica celestial* – heavenly music – is used to discredit a topic of discussion. It is impossible to say all about the All.

The fact is that we are reduced to an inarticulate state that leaves us forever dissatisfied. We can represent heaven only by means of images, as Jesus did, hoping that such images awaken a ‘desire for heaven’ rather than quench it. This is no doubt a venture condemned to failure from the start, but we have to make an attempt.

Heaven as a ‘wedding feast’

Jesus often spoke of wedding feasts. The simple image of people sitting down together around a table, sharing an abundance of what is offered to us (lots of everything, and plenty for everybody) reveals to us a God who exceeds all our expectations. It was not in vain that the early Christians saw in the Eucharist a foretaste of this messianic banquet. Furthermore, if the banquet is a wedding feast, then we are inspired to imagine the love and mutual giving of bride and bridegroom and their excitement about beginning to share a future together.

Finally becoming oneself

In Revelation 2:17 we read, ‘To those who conquer I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give them a white stone, with new names written on the stone, which no one knows except those who receive it.’ We should not forget the importance of names in the Bible: the name designates the essence, the inner identity, of the one named. Heaven means reaching our most authentic selfhood, our most authentic identity.[3] Nevertheless, it is an identity given as gift. In this does our ‘victory’ consist – in gaining our true selves.

The heavenly Jerusalem

The Bible also speaks to us of a ‘celestial city’, the heavenly Jerusalem. In Hebrew the name ‘Jerusalem’ is actually dual in number (Yerushalayim), as if wanting to indicate both a heavenly and an earthly Jerusalem. The new Jerusalem comes down from heaven, as opposed to what the builders of the tower of Babel were attempting, to reach up to heaven (Genesis 11) with the result that they became unintelligible to one another and were scattered. Furthermore, the new Jerusalem comes down ‘adorned as a bride’ (Apocalypse 21:2) in an invincible fusion of the ‘civic’ (social) and the ‘nuptial’, which thus unites the spirituality of ‘commitment for the sake of the Kingdom’ with the ‘nuptial spirituality’ of classical mysticism.

Seeing God

Heaven has also been described as a vision of God, which is the beatific vision, but we should not be fooled by the intellectual tenor of this latter expression. To understand what lies behind it we need to

refer back to the complicated ceremonial of ancient oriental courts, in which the king could be seen directly only by the most intimate and most trusted persons, those who were of similar rank. For the Hebrews, therefore, seeing God would be tantamount to becoming divine, becoming Christ, being of the same rank as God. It is for that reason that we read in 1 John 3:2, 'We will be like him because we shall see him as he is'. What human beings sought to 'achieve' at the dawn of history – becoming like God (Genesis 3:5) – finally becomes a reality, but as pure gift[4]. Furthermore, speaking of heaven as a 'vision of God' has practical consequences for here and now. In Matthew's gospel we read, 'Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God' (5:8). Later on we are told: 'As you did to one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me' (Mt 25:40). Therefore the God whom no one can see (Jn 1:18) can in reality be seen by the 'pure of heart', who are the persons who know how to 'see God in everything and everything in God' (Ignatius of Loyola). More concretely, the 'pure of heart' are those who know how to discover the beloved face of God in the faces (so often disfigured) of the people considered to be 'last' in history. For the 'pure of heart', the disfigured faces of these 'least' brethren assume a figure (a face, an image, a representation – that is, a name is given to their suffering and pain) until they are transfigured into the beloved face of the Lord. The way to 'see God' is contemplation, the goal of which is the process of reflectir (reflecting) that Ignatius recommends in the Spiritual Exercises; it is something very different from the trite practice of 'drawing a moral' from the contemplation of a scene. Being contemplative means identifying oneself with the One whom we contemplate, to the point of resembling him (seeing God = being like him). And by extension, it means identifying ourselves with, making ours, the cause of those with whom God has identified himself (Matthew 25:31-46).

Eternal life

We also speak of heaven in terms of eternal life. Eternity is not the same thing as an indefinite period of time. It is not a quantitative notion, but a qualitative one. Eternal life is life which has no 'expiry date', or, to put it better, it is life that is in no way threatened by death. Thus it is Life, with a capital L. That is what Jesus was referring to when he said, 'I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full' (John 10:10). This is something we should keep in mind, lest the idea of 'eternity' suggest to us an interminable boredom. In his encyclical on hope, Benedict XVI quotes Saint Ambrose: 'Without the assistance of grace, immortality is more of a burden than a blessing.' [5]

Returning to paradise

Finally, heaven is paradise. We were 'expelled' from paradise at the dawn of history, condemned to wander aimlessly along the dusty roads of life, always longing to return 'home' (a longing like that of the prodigal son in Luke 15:17)[6]. At times we can get a few glimpses of that home, but we aren't sure whether these console us, or rather increase the pain of the 'wound' that was opened up in the

human heart after the expulsion from paradise.

Nevertheless, the fact that the goal is still paradise corroborates a truth that we have tried to emphasise several times in the course of these reflections: eschatology speaks to us of the consummation of what was glimpsed at the very beginning.

For that reason hope ends in doxology: Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.

Purgatory

Properly speaking, the final things will be only heaven and hell – the former as salvation and the latter as the possibility of refusing salvation. What is more, we have stated – and we still state – that Christian eschatology is not a ‘doctrine of two ways’ since the only possibility it considers is that of salvation (heaven).

Furthermore, we should be mindful that we can speak of the last things only on the basis of human experiences we have here and now, experiences which our faith and our hope transpose to the great beyond, thus giving them, so to speak, ‘eschatological approval’, that is, conferring on them a certain definitive character.

In light of this, what can be said of purgatory? The first thing that this name may evoke in us is the troubling image of a ‘god’ who makes us pay right down to the last penny, or at best the image makes us think of a ‘waiting room’ through which most mortals will have to pass in order to be able to reach celestial beatitude. If we add to those images certain liturgical practices of dubious quality, we have more than enough reasons to ignore the topic.

Nevertheless, we cannot deny a certain plausibility to purgatory, first because our access to celestial beatitude will always be a creaturely access. Heaven does not mean that we fuse into God and disappear into him, but rather that we become united with him while preserving our own identity, an identity which, in its likeness to God’s, becomes supremely relational.

We know, of course, from experience that making our very own the love God gives us inevitably presupposes a process, or better: a way. Every forward movement on the way is a source of joy, but progress on the journey can also be very painful at times. John of the Cross points out quite correctly that the real misery of the human condition consists in this: what is most helpful and beneficial for us becomes harsh and difficult to absorb.

We are blinded by the excess of light. Possibly this is what purgatory is all about: knowing that we are utterly saved and nevertheless still on the way to taking full possession of that salvation. In other words: purgatory is heaven, but seen ‘from this upward slope’.

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[1]Cf. the González Faus article in: *J. I. González Faus, SJ. / Josep Giménez SJ, El mal y la misericordia. Aproximación a la Primera Semana de los Ejercicios, Barcelona, Cristianisme i Justícia, EIDES, Colección Ayudar, nº 52.*

[2]In Greek the word, *aireô* means both ‘bear’ or ‘carry’ and ‘take away’.

[3]Observe, in the apparition of the Risen One to Mary Magdalene, how Jesus finally calls her by her name, whereas the two angels call her simply, ‘Woman’ (John 20:13,15,16).

[4]We had formerly believed that God compulsively held onto his divinity, as if it were booty from war (Philippians 2) – perhaps to wield it against us – but then we become aware, with both surprise and

gratitude, that it really is a gift which he wishes to give entirely to us. As Ignatius says in his Exercises (234): 'The same Lord desires to give me himself as much as he can' (= if we let him).

[5] Spe salvi, 10.

[6]A peculiar longing: we long for something of which we have never had any full experience! Even if the longing speaks of the past, the consummation to which we aspire points us towards the future. Is this the reason why John of the Cross seeks to purify the memory (which refers us back to the past) with the virtue of hope (which orients us to the future)? 'Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?' (Is. 43:18-19).

Jose Gimenez SJ - Thinking Faith