

# O, WHAT A HEAVENLY THING!

I once knew an old lady who had been to Lourdes twenty-nine times. I was once talking quietly with her, in her eighty-fourth year, when I made what was, to me, a rather unnerving discovery: *her idea of heaven was having a tea-party with the Mother of God.* (Actually, the tea-party as such was a projection of my own, but they way she talked about it, I could almost hear the tinkle of sugar lumps in a silver bowl).

**Life after Death - an Act of Faith** We say at the very end of the Creed: *I believe in the life of the world to come. Amen!* What do we think we mean by these words? Obviously they are the most easily lampooned beliefs: death, considered in the abstract, makes fools of all human aspirations, contradicts the most heartfelt values of humanity: if there were nothing more than this life, humanity would be, as we say, *fatally flawed*. So life after death is either *the whole point* - the reality which gives our life the meaning it seems to demand - or a pathetic fiction, lending hope and significance to what would otherwise be a long and doomed procession to the grave. One of the problems is that we can't imagine anything fit to represent such a life: painters and poets and visionaries have tried, but the effect is rarely gripping, and always on the edge of ridiculous.

**Natural Instinct** There are things in our humanity which urge us to believe that human beings are not expendable. We have a profound urge to find meaning in the universe at large; we are unsatisfied if we discover apparent redundancy in it. Long experience has taught us to hope that the world will eventually make sense to us; and we find the questions raised by our humanity the most important arena of this search for meaning. Science is a long account of this process, and by conjecture, hazard, and sustained attention to experience, we have found the universe so consistent, so integrated a reality that we have come to expect its phenomena to yield a comprehensible purpose in the end. The capacity to come to a synthesis of our knowledge gives us the sense that the universe is actually a *cosmos* - a world which is held together by a purpose, in other words, by a single mind; and this is where the idea of God is born. At the other end of the scales there is a contrary tendency, born of our experience of negative realities, to conclude that the universe is senseless, and that it is a cruel conglomeration of accidental forces, engendering a tragic complex of illusory hopes which all end in a bonfire. Sickness, disability, failure, war, sin, pain, the cherishing of impossible dreams, and many other realities can reinforce this judgment on the world.

**Love is as strong as Death - an Act of Faith** The reality which speaks to us most powerfully of eternal meaning is the transcendent power of one human being to love another. This huge sense of *value for another* can inspire heroism and altruism to an astonishing degree, transforming the life of an individual to the point where all negative realities, even death itself, can be accepted for the sake of the beloved. This is a truth about human beings which can be treated with awe and respect, or (at the other end of the scales) mocked as an example of barking madness. What is certain about it is that love presents us with an overwhelming sense of integrity, an experience of the uniting and mobilising of all the faculties of body and spirit in a single cause which is worth all that we are. This experience has a unique authority when it comes to deciding what a human being is, and what human life is for. It comes to us often unbidden, unexpected, and even unwanted: it is not tidy or conspicuously voluntary: but it has to be respected and dealt with appropriately, or it has the power to defuse and paralyse the personality which tries to ignore it. Love is the most powerful and comprehensive of all the experiences which point us towards integration and purpose: it makes us *know* that we have found a purpose great enough to ground our lives.

**Revelation - is God trying to tell us something?** The Church is heir to a long tradition of belief that the Creator has ways of communicating with the world he has made. Our human mind has modes and processes which prepare us for such a belief: for instance, the *deductive* mode of reasoning, based on drawing logical conclusions from what we already know, is not the only way we learn. We use *induction* to conjecture new knowledge, which is greater than what we can deduce, and we test the hypothesis thrown up by this faculty, achieving *likelihood* as opposed to certainty, and making possible huge fields of experiment where reality comes to meet our power of imagining, and gives us a live encounter with truth that is vibrant, experiential, even risky. The notion that scientists *only* employ deductive reasoning is absurd: deduction can reveal no new truth, but only an exegesis of truth already possessed. But science is producing new knowledge all the time. Our idea that God may “come to meet us” in our searching and wondering is absolutely consistent with this way of proceeding, and is, indeed, exactly what we should expect. Respectful of our freedom and dignity, he does not overwhelm us with revealed certainties, but meets us in our believing, hoping, and loving, and awaits our attempts to discover him with thinly-disguised glee: the image of a game of hide-and-seek is irresistible; the hiding is industrious and ingenious, but the game would grind to a halt if it were perfectly successful. Too trivial a concealment insults the seekers: too perfect, it would destroy the game. The concealment of God is necessitated to preserve our freedom: but his capacity to leave clues is exactly calculated; he *wants to be found*.

**The Cosmos is a Revealer** Rather than confining revelation to sacred contexts - the realms of religious enquiry, the phenomenon of prophecy, the Incarnation itself - we should see a consistent pattern of revelatory content in the very texture of the world. Genesis sees humanity as “created in the likeness of God”, and in some way that is imprecisely defined we believe that by experiencing our humanity we are already on the way to knowing the God who wishes us to share his life. Being alive to this possibility is in perfect tune with the live awareness of human experience itself: always expectant of novelty, of fresh experience, a human being does not create his or her own world. Human life is active and creative, but it is also receptive, passive, appreciative, open to enjoyment. In our life we *are being taught*, and this teaching is leading us on towards an understanding that is not our own creation, and which can unite us with the others on our road. This community of experience and awareness is fruitful in human fidelity, generosity, and love, which are live experiences, inexplicable and unjustifiable in empirical or prudential terms, of the shared reality that are able to cancel our loneliness and alienation, and make us able to claim a home in the world.

**Some Questions** Obviously first is the question: *Do I believe in life after death?* - which, if answered affirmatively, begs the second question: *On what grounds?* Belief in life after death presupposes some level of belief in “the supernatural”, since in natural terms death looks pretty final. To what extent is the supernatural “above” the world we look out on and inhabit? How does this *belief* differ from indeterminate *wishful thinking*? How much weight does *revelation* have in your attitude to these questions? Do you have any idea why revelation is taken seriously as a source of belief?

*The Thing will be discussed on Wednesday at 1 15 pm in Fr Philip's office (Cherry Tree block C). Please come along and bring a sandwich; we usually let the discussion last about an hour.*