

**‘Eye has not seen, nor ear heard’**

Having looked at Catholic dogmas on the world to come, today we’ll reflect further on heaven. St Paul tells us, ‘Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for those who love him.’ (1 Cor 2:9) The heart of heaven is our ‘beatific vision’ of God: ‘Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face-to-face’; (1 Cor 13:12) ‘We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.’ (1 Jn 3:2)

We need to inspire people with the greatness of this destiny. Australian theologian Frank Sheed writes, ‘For many...the first reaction to a straightforward statement about heaven is a feeling that there seem to be a lot of earthly pleasures we shall miss rather badly. We imagine ourselves as sometimes looking back to the dear dead days before we were raised to eternal bliss.’ (*Theology for Beginners*, p. 172)

But he responds: ‘There is no way of realising a pleasure until one has enjoyed it... You cannot convey the delight of colour to a person who is blind... In heaven the blindness of earth will be gone.’ Also, we enjoy earthly things ‘either for the reality in them or for what we delude ourselves into imagining that they possess. The second sort will cease in heaven, for there is no place for delusion or illusion there. But the first sort we shall have in greater measure, because whatever reality is in any created thing is there by gift of God. It is, therefore, in infinite perfection, in God himself, and with him we shall be in living contact.’ United with God, we will experience the Source, the Original, of whom all created joys are only tiny reflections.

In his divine nature, God is pure Spirit, and so doesn’t literally have a ‘physical face’ as we conceive it. But the ‘face-to-face’ vision of God means the soul is in unmediated contact with his very Being – an even closer union than seeing someone’s face externally. We will know him as we know our own thoughts, or even more intimately.

‘The nearest we can get to it perhaps, is to think of the idea we now have of God; then try to conceive of God himself taking the place of the idea... Just as our knowing faculty, the intellect, so our loving faculty, the will, is to be in direct contact with God, nothing coming between, God in the will, the will in God, love without detour or admixture. So it will be with every one of our powers, energising at its very fullest upon its supreme object. And that, if you will think about it, is the definition of happiness.’ (Sheed, p. 66)

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It is vital to remember the teaching of Christ, the Bible and the Church that there are *different degrees* of heavenly happiness. All who reach heaven will be happy to the fullness of their capacity, and at a level beyond our imagining; yet the greater their holiness and love when they die, the greater this ‘capacity’ will be. Imagine a large glass and a small glass overflowing with water: both are perfectly full, yet the large glass contains more water. So also will those persons’ hearts more overflow with God, and heavenly joy, who have in this life more allowed God to *expand* their hearts with grace and charity. ‘Our charity on earth will be the measure of our sharing God’s glory in heaven.’ (CDF, *Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology* (1979) DS 4659) Charity is love of God and neighbour, nourished by the Eucharist, ‘sacrament of charity’.

In the parable of the talents, Jesus shows the different rewards given to the different servants, depending on how they used their opportunities. (*Mt* 25:14-30; *Lk* 19:11-27; cf. *Mt* 5:12; 5:19; 6:4, 6, 18; 10:41-42; 16:27; 18:4; *Mk* 9:41; *Lk* 6:23) And St Paul teaches, ‘The one who sows

sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.’ (2 Cor 9:6; cf. Rom 2:6; 1 Cor 3:8; 15:41; Rev 22:12)

The Council of Florence declared that those in heaven ‘see clearly God himself, one and three, as he is, though some more perfectly than others, according to the diversity of merits.’ (DS 1305) And the Council of Trent defined that those already in the state of grace, by their good works performed through the grace of God and the merits of Jesus Christ, of whom they are living members, ‘truly merit an increase of grace, eternal life, and (provided they die in the state of grace) the attainment of this eternal life, as well as *an increase of glory*.’ (Decree on Justification, DS 1582)

A gospel parable someone might spin the opposite way is of the labourers in the vineyard – starting work at different times yet receiving the same wage. (Mt 20:1-16) But in light of Jesus’ other words, and the Church’s infallible teaching, we cannot take that parable to mean that heavenly reward is equal *in every possible way* for all who receive it. Rather, Jesus’ point is that we must not resent God’s generosity and mercy to others. Those who worked all day failed to recognise that all they have and do is divine gift, for themselves as much as the latecomers. God’s generosity equally gives the same eternal beatific vision to all those who at least die in his grace, regardless of how late someone came to that.

Yet within that framework, it is not unjust that we still receive differently according to differing merits, as Jesus makes clear elsewhere. And grace itself, the basis of all our merits, is ultimately an undeserved gift of God’s mercy, given according to his mysterious free choice. (Thus the graces and glory he gave to Mary, he gave to no other.) Yet in heaven, we won’t be regretful, or envy those with a higher degree of happiness: we will rejoice in whatever God’s mercy and justice have decreed.

But it makes sense, even just from legitimate self-interest, not only to ensure we actually reach heaven, but to do all we can to have that greater degree of happiness to which God invites us, which will last forever. That means taking every opportunity he offers of growing in his grace, and being the holiest and most loving people we can (in this one life, this ‘one shot’ that we’re given). Especially for those of us not yet at the heights of divine love, this is a crucial motivation for ‘going beyond the minimum’ in the Christian life.

We shouldn’t fear that desiring heavenly reward is somehow ‘selfish’ (as though there was ‘only so much to go round’ and we were taking more than our share). Jesus himself often draws us on with the promise of heaven; and the Council of Trent even made a point of defining that it was not sinful for those in God’s grace to do good works with a view to an eternal reward. (Decree on Justification, DS 1581)

True, our supreme reason for doing good should be our love for *God*. But wanting heavenly happiness for ourselves, even wanting a higher degree of happiness, isn’t selfish. God actually commands us also to love *ourselves* (in a right way, that puts God first and doesn’t harm others); and that especially means, willing to ourselves the true good for which he created us. And far from harming other people, the more loving and holy we are, the better that is for others also.

So we look forward in hope and excitement to that future in which our souls will be flooded with God’s infinite goodness, perfection, beauty, knowledge and joy. Then after the Last Judgment, the soul’s ecstasy will overflow also into our risen body: our entire being, immersed forever in the life and love of the Most Holy Trinity.