

St Mark's, Broomhill, Sheffield

'Things We'd Rather Not think About ...'

A fresh look at traditional Advent themes



**Poems & Reflections
on
Heaven & Hell**

Memories, Dreams and Reflections

WHAT THE MYTHS or stories about a life after death really mean, or what kind of reality lies behind them, we certainly do not know. We cannot tell whether they possess any validity beyond their indubitable value as anthropomorphic projections. Rather, we must hold clearly in mind that there is no possible way for us to attain certainty concerning things which pass our understanding. We cannot visualise another world ruled by quite other laws, the reason being that we live in a specific world which has helped to shape our minds and establish our basic psychic conditions. We are strictly limited by our innate structure and therefore bound by our whole being and thinking to this world of ours. Mythic man, to be sure, demands a 'going beyond. all that,' but scientific man cannot permit this. To the intellect, all my mythologising is futile speculation. To the emotions, however, it is a healing and valid activity; it gives existence a glamour which we would not like to do without. Nor is there any good reason why we should.

Carl G Jung.

Heaven

IN THE HEAVEN of the god I hope for (call him X)
There is marriage and giving in marriage and transient sex
For those who will cast the body's vest aside
Soon, but are not yet wholly rarefied
And still embrace. For X is never annoyed
Or shocked; has read his Jung and knows his Freud,
He gives you time in heaven to do as you please,
To climb love's gradual ladder by slow degrees,
Gently to rise from sense to soul, to ascend
To a world of timeless joy, world without end.

Here on the gates of pearl there hangs no sign
Limiting cakes and ale, forbidding wine.
No weakness here is hidden, novice unknown.
Sin is a sickness to be cured, outgrown.
With the help of a god who can laugh, an unsolemn god
Who smiles at old wives' tales of iron rod
And fiery hell, a god who's more at ease
With bawds and Falstaffs than with pharisees.

Here the lame learn to leap, the blind to see.
Tyrants are taught to be humble, slaves to be free.
Fools become wise, and wise men cease to be bores,
Here bishops learn from lips of back-street whores,
And white men follow black-faced angels' feet
Through fields of orient and immortal wheat.

Villon, Lautrec and Baudelaire are here.
Here Swift forgets his anger, Poe his fear.
Napoleon rests. Columbus, journey done,
Has reached his new Atlantis, found his sun.
Verlaine and Dylan Thomas drink together.
Marx talks to Plato. Byron wonders whether
There's some mistake. Wordsworth has found a hill
That's home. Here Chopin plays the piano still.
Wren plans ethereal domes; and Renoir paints
Young girls as ripe as fruit but not yet saints.

And X, of whom no coward is afraid,
Who's friend consulted, not fierce king obeyed;
Who hears the unspoken thought, the prayer unprayed;
Who expects not even the learned to understand
His universe, extends a prodigal hand,
Full of forgiveness, over his promised land.

A S J Tessimond.

Heaven

IT SEEMS TO ME that there are profound implications of seeing both that heaven is a part of the created order which will be re-created and redeemed at the end of times along with earth, and that our future life is to be one of embodied resurrection in that new earth. What this means is that the world we live in is not something temporary that we will cast off as we hope for a future spiritual existence, but is the place where we learn to live as we will live for eternity, with the difference that the new heaven and earth will be united and no longer seemingly separate.

Paula Gooder.

A Clear Shell

THEN FIRE burned my body to clear shell.
Though whether the fanning tempest blew from hell
Or heaven I could not, cannot, tell -
Who have no sense
Left for so nice a difference.

But I learned the essential function of extreme pain –
Of liquid fire pouring again and again
And again through the horrified body: such pain
Makes wholly innocent.
Therefore am I impenitent

Today. Today ask no forgiveness,
Having nothing to be forgiven.
And my soul, no less
House-proud than at the beginning, shows Death
Smilingly over the place,
Trusting this new face.

Frances Bellerby.

Hell is other people

HELL IS other people who
No matter what you do
Always find something to judge
They drag you through the sludge
And see through your thin disguise
As they shred you with their eyes.
All their faults and lack
They place upon your back
Unable to see their own transgression
It becomes their only obsession
To find all of your flaws
And all your broken laws
And they won't even let you live
Because they refuse to forgive.

Heaven is other people who
No matter what you do
Choose to see the best
In you and forget the rest.
They don't dwell on your sin
Since they want all to win;
They don't create divisions
By their prideful derisions
Of those with whom they differ
For they know that the transfer
Of their own guilt to another
Will come back and smother
Their efforts to be free
And their search for unity.

Jean-Paul Sartre.

Eskimo Proverb

PERHAPS they are not stars,
but rather openings in heaven
where the love of our lost ones
pours through and shines down upon us
to let us know they're happy.

Man's Destiny in Eternity

NOW WE FACE a paradox: on the one hand nothing in the world is more precious than one single human person; on the other hand nothing in the world is more squandered, more exposed to all kinds of dangers, than the human being—and this condition must be. What is the meaning of this paradox? It is perfectly clear. We have here a sign that man knows very well that death is not an end, but a beginning. He knows very well, in the secret depths of his own being, that he can run all risks, spend his life and scatter his possessions here below, because he is immortal. The chant of the Christian liturgy before the body of the deceased is significant: Life is changed, life is not taken away.

Jacques Maritain.

Dr Faustus

FAUSTUS: Where are you damned?
Mephistopheles: In hell.
Faustus: How comes it then, that thou art out of hell?
Mephistopheles: Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.
 Think'st thou that I, who saw the face of God,
 And tasted the eternal joys of heaven,
 Am not tormented with ten thousand hells,
 In being deprived of everlasting bliss?

Christopher Marlowe.

Heaven

FISH (FLY-REPLETE, in depth of June,
Dawdling away their wat'ry noon)
Ponder deep wisdom, dark or clear,
Each secret fishy hope or fear.
Fish say, they have their Stream and Pond;
But is there anything Beyond?
This life cannot be All, they swear,
For how unpleasant, if it were!
One may not doubt that, somehow, Good
Shall come of Water and of Mud;
And, sure, the reverent eye must see
A Purpose in Liquidity.
We darkly know, by Faith we cry,
The future is not Wholly Dry.
Mud unto mud! – Death eddies near –
Not here the appointed End, not here!
But somewhere, beyond Space and Time.
Is wetter water, slimier slime!
And there (they trust) there swimmeth One
Who swam ere rivers were begun,
Immense, of fishy form and mind,
Squamous, omnipotent, and kind;
And under that Almighty Fin,
The littlest fish may enter in.
Oh! never fly conceals a hook,
Fish say, in the Eternal Brook,
But more than mundane weeds are there,
And mud, celestially fair;
Fat caterpillars drift around,
And Paradisal grubs are found;
Unfading moths, immortal flies,
And the worm that never dies.
And in that Heaven of all their wish,
There shall be no more land, say fish.

Rupert Brooke.

Scorpion

'THIS NIGHT shall thy soul be required of thee'
My soul is never required of me
It always has to be somebody else of course
Will my soul be required of me tonight perhaps?

(I often wonder what it will be like
To have one's soul required of one
But all I can think of is the Out-Patients' Department -
'Are you Mrs Briggs, dear?'
No, I am Scorpion.)

I should like my soul to be required of me, so as
To waft over grass till it comes to the blue sea
I am very fond of grass, I always have been, but there must
Be no cow, person or house to be seen.

Sea and grass must be quite empty
Other souls can find somewhere else.

O Lord God please come
And require the soul of thy Scorpion

Scorpion so wishes to be gone.

Stevie Smith.

The Fate of the Soul

NOW THAT SARTRE has replaced Dante as our eschatological authority, each statement about the Hereafter becomes more than just a piece of descriptive material about another world. It expresses even more strongly a personal attitude about action in this world.

Raymond Firth.

Lights Out

I HAVE COME to the borders of sleep,
The unfathomable deep
Forest where all must lose
Their way, however straight,
Or winding, soon or late;
They cannot choose.

Many a road and track
That, since the dawn's first crack,
Up to the forest brink,
Deceived the travellers,
Suddenly now blurs,
And in they sink.

Here love ends,
Despair, ambition ends;
All pleasure and all trouble,
Although most sweet or bitter,
Here ends in sleep that is sweeter
Than tasks most noble.

There is not any book
Or face of dearest look
That I would not turn from now
To go into the unknown
I must enter, and leave, alone,
I know not how.

The tall forest towers;
Its cloudy foliage lowers
Ahead, shelf above shelf;
Its silence I hear and obey
That I may lose my way
And myself.

Edward Thomas.

The Sickness unto Death

SOCRATES proved the immortality of the soul from the fact that sickness of the soul (sin) does not consume it as sickness of the body consumes the body. Similarly, the eternal in a person can be proved by the fact that despair cannot consume his self, that precisely this is the torment of contradiction in despair. If there were nothing eternal in a man, he could not despair at all; if despair could consume his self, then there would be no despair at all.

Søren Kierkegaard.

Crucifixion

TO BE ALIVE then
was to be aware how necessary
prayer was and impossible.

The philosophers had done
their work well, demolishing
proofs we never believed in.

We were drifting in space
time, in touch with what we had
left and could not return to.

We rehearsed the excuses
for the deficiencies of love's
kingdom, avoiding our eyebeams.

Beset, as we were,
with science's signposts, we whimpered
to no purpose that we were lost.

We are here still. What
is survival's relationship
with meaning? The answer once
was the bone's music at the lips
of time. We are incinerating
them both now in the mind's crematorium.

*

But the silence in the mind
is when we live best, within
listening distance of the silence
we call God. This is the deep
calling to deep of the psalm-
writer, the bottomless ocean
we launch the armada of
our thoughts on, never arriving.

It is a presence, then,
whose margins are our margins;
that calls us out over our
own fathoms. What to do
but draw a little nearer to
such ubiquity by remaining still?

*

He is that great void
we must enter, calling
to one another on our way
in the direction from which
he blows. What matter
if we should never arrive
to breed or to winter
in the climate of our conception?

Enough we have been given wings
and a needle in the mind
to respond to his bleak north.

There are times even at the Pole
when he, too, pauses in his withdrawal
so that it is light there all night long,

R S Thomas.

When Satan Fell

WHEN SATAN fell, he only fell
because the Lord Almighty rose a bit too high,
a bit beyond himself.

So Satan only fell to keep a balance.
'Are you so lofty, O my God?
Are you so pure and lofty, up aloft?
Then I will fall, and plant the paths to hell
with vines and poppies and fig-trees
so that lost souls may eat grapes
and the moist fig
and put scarlet buds in their hair on the way to hell,
on the way to dark perdition.'

And hell and heaven are the scales of the balance of life
which swing against each other.

D H Lawrence.

Paradise Lost

A DUNGEON horrible, on all sides round
As one great furnace flamed, yet from those flames
No light, but rather darkness visible
Served only to discover sights of woe,
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes
That comes to all; but torture without end
Still urges, and a fiery, deluge, fed
With ever-burning sulphur unconsumed:
Such place Eternal Justice had prepared
For those rebellious, here their prison ordained
In utter darkness, and their portion set
As far removed from God and light of heav'n
As from the centre thrice to th' utmost pole.

John Milton.

Ecclesiastical History of the English People

WHEN COMPARED with the stretch of time unknown to us, O king, the present life of men on earth is like the swift flight of a single sparrow through the hall where, in winter, you sit with your captains and ministers. Entering at one door and leaving by another, while it is inside it is untouched by the wintry storm; but this brief interval of calm is over in a moment, and it returns to the winter whence it came, vanishing from your sight. Man's life is similar and of what follows it, or what went before, we are utterly ignorant.

Venerable Bede.

Bede's Deathbed

BEFORE he leaves on his fated journey
No man will be so wise that he need not
Reflect while time still remains
Whether his soul will win delight
Or darkness after his death-day.

Cuthbert.

Measure for Measure

AY, BUT TO DIE, and go we know not where,
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice,
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world; or to be worse than worst
Of those that lawless and incertain thoughts
Imagine howling; 'tis too horrible!
The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment
Can lay on nature is a paradise
To what we fear of death.

William Shakespeare.

The Boarder

WHAT SHALL avail me
When I reach the border?
This staff will fail me,
This pass all in order.

These words I have learned
Will not help me then,
These honours hard earned,
And applause of men.

Absence pure and cold
Of sense and memory
Lightly will hold
All that is me.

My harp truly set
Will break string by string;
I shall quite forget
That once I could sing.

All, all will fail me,
Tongue, foot and hand.
Strange I shall hale me
To that strange land.

Edwin Muir.

Of the Immortality of the Soul

HEAVEN AND HELL suppose two distinct species of men, the good and the bad. But the greatest part of mankind float betwixt vice and virtue. Were one to go round the world with an intention of giving a good supper to the righteous and a sound drubbing to the wicked, he would frequently be embarrassed in his choice, and would find, that the merits and demerits of most men and women scarcely amount to the value of either ... The chief source of moral ideas is the reflection on the interests of human society. Ought these interests, so short, so frivolous, to be guarded by punishments, eternal and infinite? The damnation of one man is an infinitely greater evil in the universe, than the subversion of a thousand millions of kingdoms.

David Hume.

Requiem for the Living

GRANT US untroubled rest. Our sleep is fretted,
Anxious we wake, in our terrestrial room.
What wastes the flesh, what ticks below the floor will
Abort all futures, desecrate the tomb.

Let healing grace now light upon us. All flesh
Lives with its death. But may some shaft unblind
Soon our sick eyes, lest the death we choose to live with
And then must die be the murder of mankind.

Peace in our time: else upon earth a timeless
Pause of unbeing, sterile, numb and null –
Spiritus mundi, a smudge of breath wiped off
Glass; earth revolving, an idiot skull.

O living light, break through our shroud!
Release Man's mind, and let the living sleep in peace. *Cecil Day Lewis.*

Christian Hope

THE FACT that hope (and the same would be true of reason, love, faith, the pursuit of beauty and other phenomena of the spirit) has appeared in this universe of ours is itself a ground for hoping that hope is at home in the universe, that is to say, that the creative energy at work in the universe is itself ultimately a spiritual reality.

John Macquarrie.

Ecstasy of Chaos

WHEN THE IMMENSE drugged universe explodes
In a cascade of unendurable colour
And leaves us gasping naked,
This is no more than the ecstasy of chaos:
Hold fast, with both hands, to that royal love
Which alone, as we know certainly, restores
Fragmentation into true being.

Robert Graves.

To Be a Pilgrim

WE LONG TO ENJOY deep down the peace, the joy and happiness which constantly elude us. We cannot grasp them now nor keep them. It is for that deep joy and happiness that we were made. One day it will be ours. If it were not going to be ours our lives would certainly end in frustration and be unfulfilled. That is not only a terrible thing to contemplate, but it is to my way of thinking unreasonable. We are men and women moving through life like pilgrims heading towards our final destination. It is healthy to look forward to that destination when we shall find total fulfilment. That fulfilment must consist in an experience of love because love is the highest of all human experience. To love totally, to be loved completely. It is in union with that which is most lovable that we become fully ourselves. Do not be fearful of death. Welcome it when it comes. It is now a holy thing, made so by him who died that we might live.

Basil Hume.

The Kingdom

IT'S A LONG WAY off but inside it
There are quite different things going on
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you will purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

R S Thomas.

The image on the front, entitled 'Celestial Ring,' is by Frans Widerberg.