

Talking about Heaven
11 Pentecost A – 2008

How do you talk about the indescribable? Often it is by anecdote, personal experience all with limited words. Those who escaped the surly bonds of earth and ascended sky and atmosphere in a rocket launch know all too well the limits of words to describe their journey. When the astronaut gave thought of being the first man to set foot on the moon he said the immortal words, “That’s one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.” What was going on in his soul at that moment! Contrast that outer space journey to the inner heaven one feels resting in the arms of a loved one. A sense of well being and peace is priceless. Capturing it in thought and word may be too difficult.

I can not imagine there being no heaven. It’s not the stereo type we think of – scripture never talks about a parade of angels and harps, eating favorite foods with impunity or the kind of work we will do. There is no marriage as we know it. Our relationships, Jesus said, would be like that of the angels as messengers or ministering spirits. Jesus came to the apostles after the resurrection in a transformed body that was no longer subject to decay or disease. He ate and drank with them. There were no apparent physical limitations. Jesus being the firstborn from the dead, is our first glimpse of heaven.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul tells us in the 15th chapter that the physical body is raised a spiritual body. If that body is like the one Jesus sported, we are going to have a great time! If the first man, Adam, was from the earth and born of dust, then the second man, Jesus, being from heaven is born of the spirit. These breakable and broken down bodies are going to be transformed and exchanged for immortality. These things were revealed to Paul. They are beyond science. We look forward to new life as we live this one by faith.

Jesus in today’s gospel gives us some snapshots of what heaven is like. The parables had more meaning for the listeners in his day than ours because they lived closer to the examples he gave. In the first parable heaven is compared to one of the smallest yet profitable seeds grown – the mustard plant. Among tiny seeds the mustard produces a most unexpectedly large and branching shrub-like plant. Jesus’ language about the bird’s nesting in the branches recalls the image of a tree representing a mighty nation, a whole

kingdom. An entire people springing from tiny, humble beginnings are hardly a foreign concept to Jesus' Jewish listeners. What was Israel but a tree sprouted from the single seed of Abraham's faith? The birds of the air flocking to this tree suggest the emigration of people from all the flocks of the world, making the tree their new home - their nests - and adding to the strength of that kingdom. In a word, heaven is a home for many nations of people.

Baking from scratch with raw elements gave Jesus listeners a comparison with something they knew very well. In the parable of the yeast and flour Jesus compares the leavening power of yeast to heaven. The yeast penetrated all the flour in order for it to become lighter and softer when baked into bread. So what was Jesus saying? Heaven acts upon our souls to take the flat places and hardness out of our lives. Heaven like yeast raises our hope and focus on becoming like Christ for he said, My burden is easy and my yoke is light."

The third parable says that heaven is about finding treasure. Who doesn't like thinking that some precious metal, piece of art or furniture might be discovered and be bought? In this example the treasure is found in a field that one does not own. The treasure is buried with the hope one can retrieve it later. The treasure is so wonderful that one says, "I just have to have it!" So you find out what the price of that field is and you go home to find out whether you can afford to buy it by selling everything. Heaven is like that treasure. When you find it you are willing to do everything in your power to get it.

Now if the parable suggests that the average person listening to Jesus would try to buy this field, this treasure must be very special and important. People don't just sell their home and household for just anything. Jesus knows the listener can not imagine what this treasure could be. All the listener knows is that this field and treasure, to use a metaphor, is "to die for." In a word, God's heaven is precious and worth more than anything we could imagine.

In the fourth parable Jesus goes back to the precious metaphor again. This time it is a valuable pearl found by a merchant. And the response is similar to that of the treasure finder: "go for broke!"

So far, Jesus has targeted the farmer, the kitchen, the treasure hunter and the merchant with metaphors for God's kingdom of heaven. Now it's the fisherman's turn – after all there was a sizable lake in Northern Israel know as Genneseret or the Sea of Galilee.

Nets were common fishing tools in Jesus day. They would be drawn closed to catch any fish in its path as the weights pulled it downward through the water. Heaven is compared to a catch of fish of every kind. The good fish are separated from the bad fish based on whether they were edible or in accordance with dietary laws. The parable compares the fish to the evil that are separated from the righteous by the angels – a job that only they are suited for.

Heaven is like.... Each one of us could finish that sentence with our own thoughts of bliss. The apostle Paul wrote of his own experience: "Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it entered into the mind of man what God has prepared for those who love him." Heaven is both a place and a state of mind. As both an external and internal reality heaven is the promise of God's presence. It is a place of welcome to all righteous people, it softens the bitterness of life, and it is precious and worth all we have. Jesus tells us in Luke's gospel, "The kingdom of heaven is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." (Luke 17:21). The believer is practicing that presence now in this life in order to be ready for the next. Therefore let us draw closer to God that we may be more aware each day of the reality of heaven that is with us. The parables I believe, suggest that unless we are prepared by the kingdom of heaven within us we will not be able to enter the fullness of heaven to come. Amen.