

HEAVEN



Before I tell you what I'm going to talk about, I want to try some word association

I'd like you to close your eyes and, when I say a word, think of the next word that comes immediately into your mind. Don't need to say it, just think of it.

Cat

Bus

Sea

Heaven

Ok- hold that thought - can I get a volunteer scribe please? Can you call out the first word that came into your head when I said Heaven? **[capture these]**



Interesting! I wanted to chat about Heaven, as it's something we don't seem to talk about very much- which is odd, given that most of us are planning to spend the rest of eternity there. It's a bit like booking an amazing holiday without looking at the brochure.

Now, a PROPER sermon should be a structured talk based on biblical texts leading to some solid conclusions and possibly points for action.

....This is going to be NOTHING like that! It's a series of personal ideas, randomly chucked together to get you thinking and, I hope, chatting over coffee afterwards.

So don't hold your breath waiting for the point- I'm not sure there is one - it's more a case of, if you hear

HEAVEN

anything useful, help yourself, if you hear anything that doesn't resonate for you, don't worry about it.

I have, however, bowed to tradition in one respect: it IS in 3 parts, namely:

Heaven - what's it like?

Who gets to go?

Why does it matter?



So! The easy one first- what's it like?

How can we imagine something that is beyond imagination?

The Bible DOES have a number of pictures of Heaven, but I get the sense that they are there to give us an impression, a taster rather than a solid description; they are also written TO an initial audience rather than us, so may be full of images that don't necessarily mean anything to us today. However, I fervently believe that although these may not have been written TO us, they were written FOR us: God's word has that amazing quality of being true when it was spoken, true now, and true for ever - it just may be that different aspects of that truth become apparent to different audiences at different times.

HEAVEN

So -let's start with an obvious description: can I have the first reading please, from Revelation 4: you might want to close your eyes to get the full effect: **Reading 1**

Pretty amazing stuff: when I first heard this though it sounded like we were going to spend eternity falling down before God singing holy Holy Holy, which sounded a little, well, repetitive and, dare I say, boring? At least, that was until I heard this:

Bach Sanctus - B minor mass – Track 10

And I thought- actually, I could enjoy singing that for a couple of thousand years anyway.

But on further reading though, that description is what John first sees when he enters heaven in a vision. It's almost like the entrance lobby bit, the welcome to get you in the mood. I've seen similar descriptions from people who have died and returned to life, and I think they are intended to convey the unbelievable majesty and awe and holiness of God: think of it maybe as a poster advertising heaven rather than a programme of activities for when we get there.

Also- crucially - this description is all before all the end times tribulations and the lake of fire and burning dragons and so on; I'm going to skip over that bit

HEAVEN

(for the moment) and get straight to the happy ending part for another description- **Reading 2**



This is one of my favourite pictures- it's called **The Plains of Heaven** and hangs in the Tate: it's huge: what you can only vaguely see here is this huge scale of it: (describe people gathering to go to ships and sail across to enormous mountains and then, just behind, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven.)

This reading gives us a glimpse of the ongoing wonder of heaven: God will be right there in the middle of everything, but I think it's going to be more than just one very long church service. I have heard people describe it as being like an eternal worship session when we are all doing nothing but worshipping God and are almost unaware of each other, but that sounds more like a Buddhist mush than the creation of a personal God.

Now- here's a thought - have you noticed how, as we (hopefully) become more and more like Jesus, we DON'T become more and more like each other? It's more as if we become more truly ourselves, and I think that is so that we can, between the billions of us who are going to be there, reflect all the different aspects of Gods character.

HEAVEN

There's a part of God that loves loud Hawaiian shirts and so he's got SteveO to reflect that; He must REALLY like terrible jokes cos he's planned to have TWO other Steves to make sure that's covered.

And he REALLY loves caring, and looking out for people, cos there are loads of people in this church alone who do love doing that. So, I think, our individuality will be perfected in Heaven. ALSO- God is in essence a relational being: He exists as three persons and models perfect relationships within Himself, and this involves lots of communicating: as such, I think we are going to know who we are and recognise others (in spite of our new bodies) and want to communicate with each other. Someone said to me once that he thought heaven was a place where we're all going around telling each other how amazing God is.

I used to think of heaven in a very vague way - up until the day my brother in law was killed in a car crash. He was 27 and my sister only 24. They'd been married 18 months: It happened to be not long after the death of David Watson, a well-known evangelical Anglican vicar and I remember chatting at Chris's funeral and someone saying "Chris will have met David Watson by now" and someone else saying. "yes, and Moses, and Elijah" It hit me then that I really believe in this place.

HEAVEN

I think there is much hope to be gained from this, particularly to those who've lost loved ones. When my sister was going through the inevitable grief from losing her husband so unexpectedly, one of the letters she wrote home spoke of walking into heaven and demanding some answers. I just had a picture of her arriving there and seeing Jesus standing with his arm around Chris's shoulders and there being no more questions. We will know each other and There'll be a lot of catching up to do.

It's a bit like people chatting here before a service- God is definitely present but He can barely get a word in as we're so keen to catch up and find out how everyone is doing: I have to confess I used to find it frustrating, particularly if I was in the band that day and we were trying to finish rehearsing: but then one day I closed my eyes and listened and realised that what I could hear was the Love of God made manifest. Can't really complain about that. Heaven will be like that, only much more so.

Beyond those ideas, Maybe God doesn't like spoilers, and the rest of it is just too wonderful to be described - well just have to wait and see

So -who gets to go?



Let's have another reading: **Reading 3** please

HEAVEN

So, we all get *judged* by what we've done, BUT, whether we get In Depends on whether our name is in the book, which is a huge relief for me. The picture I have is of us all standing in a line and seeing our lives laid bare before God and the whole of creation. Can't say I'm looking forward to that but I think there'll be two things stopping me for dying of embarrassment: for one, well already be dead and, two, everyone else will be dreading it just as much.

At the end of my very long list I can see God looking up at me and asking what I've got to say for myself: I'm planning just to point to Jesus standing at Gods right hand and saying "He said I could come in" and Jesus turning to God the father and saying "it's ok dad, he's one of mine"

SO - how do we get our name in the book?

Definitely need to refer to the Bible on this one!

Reading 4

And this one: **Reading 5**

So- the only way we get in is by saying yes to Jesus. I don't think it matters if you've done that in one sudden life changing moment, or just realised one day that you have said yes: just as long as you know you HAVE.

HEAVEN

Note there's isn't a 10 point statement of doctrine we have to sign up to, or even a specific variation of the creed we must agree on. Just say yes to Jesus.

Now- here's a potentially controversial thought: is it possible to say yes to him if we've never heard of him? I wonder if there are fervent followers of other faiths who somehow come to know him without ever knowing his name? Don't get me wrong, I don't believe any other faith can save anyone as none of them even comprehends the Grace of god which is at the heart of salvation: Jesus IS the only way, but, is it not possible for God to reach people without them ever having heard of Him? He did it with Abraham- just turned up and started speaking. And with Moses a few hundred years later. How about this from Romans:

Reading 6

So it seems to me that God judges people on how they've responded to Him, whether they've actually heard of Jesus or not. That might be one to discuss over coffee. Ultimately - shall not the judge of all the Earth do what is right?

We, however, HAVE heard of Jesus. So if there's anyone here today who hasn't said that yes to him, and doesn't know for a certainty that their name is in the book of life, why not do it now?

HEAVEN

You've nothing to lose and everything to gain. As for people we know who have heard his name but aren't interested, I guess all we can do is keep praying for them and an opportunity to share who Jesus really is.



Why does it matter? What's the point of this talk about heaven? Is it just pie in the sky when you die, so put up with whatever's happening today? What does the bible say?

Let's have another reading: **Reading 7**

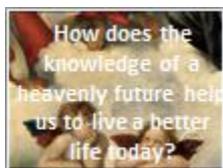
So, Paul here is encouraging us to be ready and alert all the time because we never know when the end is coming: it could be anytime soon but, even if it's not, our own end could come any time we don't know.

So - what should we do? History is full of people who have recognised the urgency of the second coming, have carefully calculated the days, numbers of days, times and half a time in various prophecies; worked out what Gog and Magog mean, when the thousand years are, who the Antichrist is and the gone and stood on a hill top on a wet Tuesday afternoon waiting for Jesus to come and take them home.....and usually ended up looking rather silly as a result. But look at what Paul says just after this about how we should behave in the light of this urgency: **Reading 8**

HEAVEN

There's no standing on hilltops or escaping the world there- it's just, heaven's just around the corner, so, be nice to each other! And look out for those who can't look out for themselves.

How did Jesus say the world would recognise those who knew him?



So, how does the knowledge of a heavenly future help us to live a better life today?
I ran out of ideas at this point so....

Would you like to discuss that in twos or threes where you're sitting now? I'll give you about 5 minutes, then we'll get some ideas; Canvass ideas from everyone

Brilliant- all those ideas are much better than anything I could come up with

Finally, I want to finish by saying let's go and do that. But I'd like to leave the last word to CS Lewis. This is from the Last Battle: spoiler alert, if anyone hasn't finished reading the chronicles of Narnia, you might want to put your fingers in your ears (everyone dies)

Then close to your eyes and listen to this.