

The Wedding at Cana *Bristol Cathedral 20th January 2013*

I once asked one of the men who taught me history what got him interested in his life's work. He told me that, at school, a master had talked about heaven as 'refrigerium' (a place of refreshment and coolness). He wondered why heaven would be cool until he realised that if you were writing in (say) North Africa in the heat of the day that would be what you would hope for. He was then hooked on the study of context: why might you say one thing and not another, in this place, at that time. A place of coolness; now, it would be unbecoming of me to complain about the Deanery which is a wonderful house, but it was built at a time when no one had thought of double-glazing. As I was dressing this morning, with snow all round, it did strike me that if heaven is indeed cool I am not sure I want to go.

There is one of the problems we encounter when we try to describe heaven. Here is another. During the First World War *The Westminster Gazette* published a poem about those who had died in the carnage of the trenches:

Wide hills lay silent in the sun,
Blue valleys slept between.

They saw far off a little wood
Stand up against the sky.
Knee-deep in grass a great tree stood
Some lazy cows went by
There were some rooks sailed overhead,
And once a church-bell pealed.
"God! but it's England," someone said,
"And there's a cricket-field!"¹

This is a vision of heaven, and heaven, you will have noticed, turns out to be the English countryside and the promise of cricket. Now, one or two of you, with the addition of a *Times* crossword and a cup of tea, will feel that here is everlasting bliss and the very gates of paradise. One or two of you will wonder why there is no mention of chocolate, and some of you will be plunged into deep despair at the thought of an eternity spent gazing at Silly Mid Off. Talking about heaven is a tricky business, if I tell you it is going to be the sound of Mozart, you will get grumpy if you were hoping for Barry Manilow.

The truth is that we have consistently struggled to talk about heaven in a way that is compelling and exciting. 'Faith, hope and love' we say, 'these three'. We claim that we are people of hope; we say that hope is what defines us. I once heard Henry Chadwick preach, he was probably the cleverest man I ever knew and he spoke with huge authority, 'If there is one thing that Christianity has given to the world' he said, 'It is hope'. Yet, we do not know what it is that we hope for. We can't talk about heaven with any conviction.

There is a reason for that. If we could all just look thoughtful for a moment I will try to explain. We are a generation that have seen pictures of the earth taken from space, and there is no room for the heavens in that picture. It was not always like that. Read Genesis and you will find that the idea that shaped pretty well all the writing of the bible was that God began not with nothing, but chaos and everlasting night. He had something like the surge of the sea before him and creation was the act of turning chaos into order, dividing this from that, putting things in place. That's the language of Genesis

Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.
Genesis 1:6

It sounds a bit baffling to us, but if you think of God contending with the deep and the dark he must first create light and divide it from dark (not muddle them up) and then make a space amongst the waters. So there is a

dome in which the earth and sky, the land, sun and stars all fit and, beyond that dome, another reality. God himself set his throne on this dome – he is in the heavens. That is why so much of our language about heaven is that it is ‘up there’, it’s why we have ascension, or Jacob’s ladder.

Our problem comes when you no longer believe that there are waters above and waters below, no longer believe in the dome. First you abandon the idea that God is ‘up there’ and next you abandon the idea that he is anywhere particular at all and then heaven becomes a rather vague idea, much more imagination than fact. And he imagines cricket, I imagine claret and she imagines George Clooney. It all gets rather silly.

At which point we need to look at our gospel reading and the story of the miracle at Cana, because it is all about heaven.

Years ago I was taken to Cana in Galilee. I was on a pilgrimage, one of those jaunts for spiritual tourists, three holy sites, a shop and a good supper. I wore a panama hat and tried to look serious. But at Cana I got cross. Nobody thought to mention the fact that the place we visited was almost certainly not Cana at all. Other villages further north, had a better claim. So, in the wrong place and in a church full of smug and dusty cherubs we gazed at a battered pot. ‘This’, said the guide, ‘was ‘it’, one of the jars that had held first water and then wine. Well it wasn’t. This pot would have held about six pints. The authentic items were bigger, so much bigger that they contained 20 gallons. When Jesus had finished at Cana-in-Galilee there was enough wine to have them feasting till Friday. The guide was careless, the information incorrect.

And that does real violence to the miracle at Cana which is actually a story in which the precision matters. Christ comes to Cana, John tells us, ‘on the third day’. The third day is the day of resurrection. So the story starts with Christ looking like the Saviour who rises from the dead. He goes to a wedding feast and to Jews and to early Christians the wedding feast is *the* symbol of the moment when God does what he promised to do. It is what Isaiah says, ‘Your maker is your husband’. It is what The Revelation of St John tells us, ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb’. When Jesus comes to Cana that happens, God comes to his people and it is the Day of the Lord.

Then there is the wine. This was a preposterous miracle that generated 120 gallons of wine. This is not just a party, this is absurd, extravagant, and abundant, so much better than dinner at the Deanery. This is the beginning of the banquet of the kingdom of God. It is the time when the harvest will be abundant, when vines will hang heavy with fruit and the mountains shall drip sweet wine, which is what Amos promised. One book, described this day in detail and promises that each grape on a vine would produce exactly one hundred and twenty gallons of wine. When Christ comes to Cana, the Kingdom comes. It is you see a foretaste, a glimpse, of heaven.

You see what has happened to us is that we gave up the waters above and the dome set in the sky, gave up the idea that heaven is ‘up there’, and also gave up everything else the bible wants to say about heaven as well. The really interesting thing the bible wants to tell us is not about where heaven *is*, but that heaven and earth are part of the same creation and that God rules in both. We are supposed to see connections. We have given up, we think heaven is imaginary. Not a bit of it, the story of Cana in Galilee wants to tell us that God is here and that the signs of his Kingdom are generosity, rejoicing and good company. That’s the key message, that heaven, God’s Kingdom comes close when we live as if we are at a wedding feast and rejoice.

And there is something more, there is the conversation between Jesus and his mother. Jesus intervenes at the feast because he is asked to do so by his mother. Yet, he barely acknowledges her. Notice, she is not *mother*, he calls her “gunai”, ‘woman’. She tells him there is no wine and he replies in Aramaic idiom: “What to me and to thee, woman, the hour is not yet come”. He does not call her mother and does not treat her as a son.

Only later as the gospel ends does it make sense. On Calvary, as Mary stands watching him die, Jesus, harks back to Cana-in-Galilee and says something strange. He calls her “gunai”, ‘woman,’ once more. Now his hour has come and things are different. He says ‘woman (gunai) behold thy son’. Having demolished Mary’s family at Cana, he recreates it on Calvary.

The point is, you see, that Mary cannot see the Kingdom until she has come the way of the cross, cannot understand the Kingdom until she has grasped that there are no privileged, no special relationships there. Hard as it is, there is no mother and son, no pair of lovers; heaven is a new community where relationships are not privileged and exclusive in that way. It is a different kind of community, it's a new sort of loving in which all are equals and all can find a place. And *that* is what we should be hoping for, seeking, trying to build. Heaven is not a state of mind. It arrived that day in Cana. It is not a bit of spirituality, pie in the sky when you die. It is robust enough to gather up the agony of the cross, real and urgent in its insistence that we need to make new communities of grace and generosity.

Jesus comes to us in blood and broken bone; reveals himself in bread and wine; summons us to a wedding feast. We keep making our religion into ideas, concepts, spiritual feelings; he keeps bursting to insist it is so much more than that. We have a hope, a hope of heaven that begins here, when our lives filled with generosity and joy, and when our relationships create new communities. We must not sell that short. You might say, 'it's just not cricket'.

¹ *T. P. Cameron Wilson*