

# Heaven and Hell

Sunday 10th April 2011

STARTING OUT

## Heaven on earth?

As we travel through Lent and approach Holy Week and our commemoration of the last few days of Jesus' life, it is appropriate to spend some time thinking about our ultimate destiny. We recalled at the beginning of Lent that we live and we die, we are supposed to remember that we are dust. So what happens to us after we die? We know what happens to our bodies, but what happens to our sense of self, our personhood, all our memories and lived experience? And if there is an afterlife, how will we experience it?

Religions not only provide varied answers to these questions, but in today's society we also see a range of afterlife 'experts' who claim to know what is happening on the other side of life. Psychics, clairvoyants, shamans, astral travellers, people who say they are in contact with angels and spirits all claim to be able to tell us about who and what is beyond death and what they are doing and saying.

Christians do not need these kinds of beliefs to provide answers about life after death. The essence of Christian belief in our ultimate destiny lies in the Easter events, of Jesus crucified and risen from the dead, showing in his own resurrected body the beginning of new life with God. He was the same Jesus, the disciples' teacher and friend, capable of being recognised, who continued to speak with and care for, the people that he loved. In the resurrection appearances to the disciples, we see the life God wants for us and makes possible for us.

But we are not there yet, and Holy week is still a week away. And before we get there and celebrate the extraordinary story of our redemption, we are still, as it were, in this world, trying to work out what God is doing and what we should be doing to join in. So our exploration of Hell and Heaven has another dimension, - not that of an afterlife, but of life now and how it is experienced by people throughout the world.

What kinds of images are conjured up by 'heaven' and 'hell'? The images we think of when



**The Last Judgement by Fra Angelico**  
(part of a collection of reproductions compiled by The Yorck Project)





we imagine a paradise or a hell are drawn from this world, whether they are images of peace and beauty, or torture and despair. And it is in this world that some people dream of holidays on 'paradise' islands and others experience hell on earth every day. All kinds of Unreconciled people remain unreconciled because their conditions are hellish. When Jesus read the passage of Isaiah in the Temple about raising up the poor, curing the sick and releasing the captives, he was setting himself against human-made hells and committing himself to the transformation of God's world. In this resource, we will think more about how this is to be done.

## Activity

Choose from the selection below:

- Organise a talk from a local history society or get older members of the congregation to talk about what life was like in your area during the Second World War. If your area was bombed, what has happened since to rebuild and reconstruct buildings?
- Visit a war memorial and make a note of all or some of the names. Write some thoughts or a short letter to the future from the dead person about their hopes and dreams for the survivors of the war.
- Cut out pictures and headlines from magazines and newspapers or download images from the internet to make a collage to illustrate 'hell on earth'.
  - What would it take to change these images to places of peace and beauty?
  - What organisations and charities are you aware of working for change in this way?
  - Consider how you could offer support or set up a project to make a difference in your local situation.



Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington

Photo: Wally Gobetz 

GOING DEEPER

## Living hells

We are aware from TV footage, newspaper pictures and requests for donations by charities, of the hellish lives many people seem apparently doomed to suffer. We see the pictures of malnourished children, diseased adults, people standing up to their necks in flood water, people living in makeshift camps because of natural disasters or displaced by war. We are familiar with such images, we are moved by compassion for those suffering people and we want to help. We give money, we say prayers, we run coffee





mornings and fun runs for excellent causes. We support mission and development agencies and look forward to news of help offered and needs met.

But how many other people are not visible to us in this way? How many suffering people do we simply never see or hear about? The world was horrified by the story of Elisabeth Fritzl, living in an underground room all her life in an ordinary suburban neighbourhood, being abused by her father and giving birth to his children. The horror was not just at the hell that was constructed underneath her home, but at the fact that this could happen so close to us, not in some 'other' country or climate that we can safely never encounter, but here among us in places familiar to us.

We don't often stop to think how many people are living in Unreconciled groups in our own neighbourhoods and communities, whose lives are hell simply because they are overlooked and forgotten. Aid workers are not going to reach them. International organisations are not going to put images of their plight on TV. They are not going to receive our donations or shoe boxes. They are not even going to figure in our prayers. They have to exist day by day by themselves and we sometimes make their situation worse by not paying enough attention to who they are and where they live.

The abused wife, husband, elderly parent or child who simply doesn't make it on to anybody's radar, because they haven't got enough obvious injury; the child in the sweat shop in this country who is there because we want new, cheap clothes today and not tomorrow; the person who is sliding slowly, inexorably into impossible debt who hides it by borrowing more and more until a bottle of sleeping pills seems the only way out; the young person who goes missing one day and who becomes a statistic, but who is today a sex worker on a street round the corner from our offices; the child whose life is daily made a misery by bullies who send her threatening texts and post humiliating pictures on Facebook. We hear about these people only when they get to the end of their hell: they get seriously injured enough to die; they commit suicide; they die of an overdose. When that happens we're sorry and demand that something should be done.







## Activity

- Pick a problem of our own society which could potentially hurt people in your own community such as alcoholism, debt, drugs, mental health issues, bullying etc. These problems can often be hidden from families, neighbours, colleagues and friends for a long time if the affected person says nothing about it or takes steps to hide it.
- Find out some more about how that problem affects individuals and families from charities specialising in that area. How does the problem get worse and what happens to people who are locked inside it? What signs may become apparent that the problem is there and how do we recognise when a person is suffering and needs help?
- How could your church become involved in being alert to such problems and providing support for those affected by it? What would it take for those people to live in the 'heaven' of freedom from their difficulties, so that they can flourish properly?

[www.cofe.anglican.org/debt/strugglingwithdebt](http://www.cofe.anglican.org/debt/strugglingwithdebt)

[www.bullying.co.uk](http://www.bullying.co.uk)

[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

[www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)

MOVING ON

## Celebrating the Bible

### Ezekiel 37.1-14

#### KJV

The hand of the LORD was upon me, and carried me out in the spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley which was full of bones,  
 And caused me to pass by them round about: and, behold, there were very many in the open valley; and, lo, they were very dry.  
 And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord GOD, thou knowest.  
 Again he said unto me, Prophesy upon these bones, and say unto them, O ye dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.  
 Thus saith the Lord GOD unto these bones; Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and ye shall live:  
 And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring up flesh upon you, and cover you with skin,

#### NRSV

#### The Valley of Dry Bones

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord GOD, you know.' Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.'





Photo: Mike Seidman ©

**(KJV continued)**

and put breath in you, and ye shall live; and ye shall know that I am the LORD.

So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to his bone.

And when I beheld, lo, the sinews and the flesh came up upon them, and the skin covered them above: but there was no breath in them.

Then said he unto me, Prophecy unto the wind, prophecy, son of man, and say to the wind, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.

So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood up upon their feet, an exceeding great army.

Then he said unto me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say, Our bones are dried, and our hope is lost: we are cut off for our parts.

Therefore prophecy and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, O my people, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel.


And ye shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O my people, and brought you up out of your graves, And shall put my spirit in you, and ye shall live, and I shall place you in your own land: then shall ye know that I the LORD have spoken it, and performed it, saith the LORD.

**(NRSV continued)**

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.'





Although we have been thinking about the hell on earth that people can experience, Scripture offers us images of God's extraordinary saving power. Through God there is hope, restoration and new promise. Ezekiel is overwhelmed by an extraordinary vision of the dead brought back to life. Not just dead bodies, but dried out, scattered bones, as far from the living bodies of people as you can get. Yet in the vision, God takes the bones and reforms the bodies and breathes the spirit of life into them, so that they are completely restored, not just one or two lucky individuals but the vast multitude from a long lost military campaign. Ezekiel understands this as a profound message of hope for Israel, who will be restored by God. The vision shows us something else: a dynamic, active, searching, creating, restoring God who never gives up on people. Though we die, God desires to restore us, to fetch us from our graves, to 'fit us for heaven' and to make it possible to be alive in the Divine presence. This is what God wants for human beings, and not just in some remote afterlife, but now (see the New Testament reading for today for more about this).

### Some questions for discussion

- What does the image of the dry bones coming to life mean to you?
- Where do you see hopeful signs of change and transformation in your neighbourhood, in this country, in the world?
- Imagine you were Ezekiel. How would you go about sharing what you'd seen and learned with other people? How do we spread the message of hope?

CELEBRATING THE BIBLE

## Gospel

John 11:17-27, 34-44

### KJV

<sup>17</sup>Then when Jesus came, he found that he had lain in the grave four days already.  
<sup>18</sup>Now Bethany was nigh unto Jerusalem, about fifteen furlongs off:  
<sup>19</sup>And many of the Jews came to Martha and Mary, to comfort them concerning their brother.  
<sup>20</sup>Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him: but Mary sat still in the house.  
<sup>21</sup>Then said Martha unto Jesus, Lord, if thou hadst been here, my brother had not died.  
<sup>22</sup>But I know, that even now, whatsoever thou wilt ask of God, God will give it thee.  
<sup>23</sup>Jesus saith unto her, Thy brother shall rise again.  
<sup>24</sup>Martha saith unto him, I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day.

### NRSV

#### Jesus the Resurrection and the Life

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even





(KJV continued)

<sup>25</sup>Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:

<sup>26</sup>And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?

<sup>27</sup>She saith unto him, Yea, Lord: I believe that thou art the Christ, the Son of God, which should come into the world.

[John 11:34-44](#)

<sup>34</sup>And said, Where have ye laid him? They said unto him, Lord, come and see.

<sup>35</sup>Jesus wept.

<sup>36</sup>Then said the Jews, Behold how he loved him!

<sup>37</sup>And some of them said, Could not this man, which opened the eyes of the blind, have caused that even this man should not have died?

<sup>38</sup>Jesus therefore again groaning in himself cometh to the grave. It was a cave, and a stone lay upon it.

<sup>39</sup>Jesus said, Take ye away the stone. Martha, the sister of him that was dead, saith unto him, Lord, by this time he stinketh: for he hath been dead four days.

<sup>40</sup>Jesus saith unto her, Said I not unto thee, that, if thou wouldest believe, thou shouldest see the glory of God?

<sup>41</sup>Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead was laid. And Jesus lifted up his eyes, and said, Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me.

<sup>42</sup>And I knew that thou hearest me always: but because of the people which stand by I said it, that they may believe that thou hast sent me.

<sup>43</sup>And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth.

<sup>44</sup>And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go.

(NRSV continued)

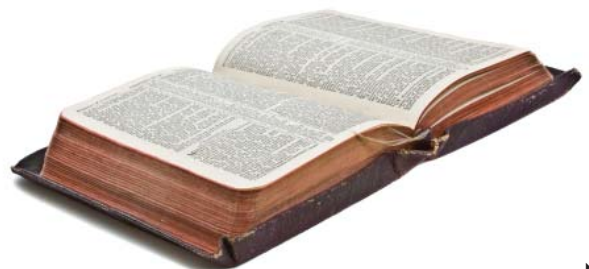
though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

[John 11:34-44](#)

He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

### Jesus Raises Lazarus to Life

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'







This account in John's Gospel is very clear. Jesus did not stop Lazarus dying; Jesus did not turn up in time to do anything; Jesus did not take away the desperation and deep grief of losing a loved one. Surely he should and could have done so, 'Lord if you had been here...' (11: 21). So Jesus does not make death less real, he and his friends experience the death, its sorrow and suffering. Jesus himself weeps for his dead friend. But it is equally true that Jesus' 'doing nothing' was not because he didn't love Lazarus, or those who would be devastated by Lazarus' death. It doesn't mean that he doesn't love us.

The Christian faith affirms death as real and awful, before it brings consolation. It is not superficial comfort but life through death and hope through despair. We are called to travel on this journey of bereavement and we will travel the journey through death ourselves. Indeed it is the journey that God takes in and through his Son.

### Some questions for discussion

- How have your experiences of sharing in peoples' dying and coping with bereavement affected your faith?
- Imagine you were Lazarus or a member of his family. What would life have been like after he came out of the tomb? Have you had any experiences of being saved or reprieved from injury or death that could help you relate to this?

### MOVING INTO LENT

## Following Jesus

The raising of Lazarus is a traditional story for Lent, reminding us of a sign of God's power and preparing us to enter more deeply into the mystery of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. But Jesus was also concerned to get his followers and audience to think about how this human life lived now relates to life with God after we die. So he tells the story of another Lazarus, a beggar covered in sores whose life is a living hell (Luke 16.19-31). Meanwhile, a rich man is enjoying heaven on earth in his fine palace. After they die, the roles are reversed. The rich man is suffering in hell and Lazarus is in heaven. The rich man asks for help but is told that he cannot be helped. He asks instead for living people to be given a warning, but is told that even if a person were raised from the dead in front of their eyes, they wouldn't believe it and would just go on pleasing themselves.

Jesus offers an insight into human nature and tries to get people to see that how we relate to people around us makes a difference to who we are. The rich man ends up separated from God by a huge gulf because he has been shaped and moulded by his selfishness and love of luxury. And this goes on being true because we don't really understand what God wants of us; we ignore the promptings of the Holy Spirit and go on pleasing ourselves. In Lent, if we want to follow Jesus, we have to sit down with him and work on what this story means for us. We have a chance not to be one of those who are unimpressed by one who is raised from the dead. We can hear the message and make sense of what it means.







## Activity

- Divide the group into two. One of the two groups can represent Lazarus and the other the rich man. Compose some postcards, emails, or a series of Facebook exchanges, tweets or text messages from Lazarus to the rich man and vice versa. Imagine what they might want to say to each other about their past lives, their situation now and the future of the rich man's family.
- What gift might Lazarus want to send to the rich man? What gift would the rich man want to send to his family?

### MOVING OUT

## Action in the community

Visit a park, heritage site or conservation area. Find an area around the church or in the community – the churchyard, an allotment, or an old shed and make a project to offer people a 'glimpse of heaven'. This task could also be annexed to a patronal festival, flower or harvest festival, a concert or school event.



### RESTING ON THE WAY

## Theological reflection and prayer

In Iain M Bank's science fiction novel *Surface Detail* (2010) Hells are virtual reality environments kept by civilisations to make people (and aliens) behave. Individuals are taken there and shown hell so that they will not rebel in the real world. A war begins in the real world to have the hells destroyed, while a greedy tycoon maintains the hells on his own estate for his own personal profit. Two of the characters go to one of the hells hoping to bring back evidence of the extent of torture and pain to get the hells stopped by those who control the computer simulations. One escapes, but one, having lost hope, is trapped inside. Interestingly, she then finds a place called the Refuge which is like a monastery – except that everyone who goes there must believe in and worship God. If you don't or can't you will be punished. So the Refuge too, is a part of hell, - where belief is mandatory and the unquestioning creatures there are entirely in slavery to God. Eventually, Chay dies in the Refuge to become an angel of death in hell, releasing tortured souls from their suffering by killing them, and taking into herself their eternal pain.

### For discussion and reflection

- What do you make of the idea that forced belief is itself a kind of hell? Who might be treated like this today?
- What do you think about Banks' idea of a tycoon who keeps people in hell for profit? What do you think he might be saying about the world we live in?
- What do you make of popular computer games like *Silent Hill* and *Resident Evil* that allow players to encounter hell-like environments, and those featuring tortured souls, vampires and zombies?





## Prayer

Lord,  
 You have not only died,  
 You have travelled the wastelands of despair,  
 You opened the gates of hell  
 And led the hopeless into hope,  
 Into the brightness of new life.  
 Help us to follow you even into hell  
 So that of those given you  
 We would lose none. Amen

## DECISION TIME

# What is going to change?

Now gather up your thoughts and ideas, and with these things in mind, consider these questions:

- **Where is the seed of new life?** What gifts has God given us to become heaven-makers in our own situation?
- **How will we carry it?** What resources will we need to make a difference in our situation and make the world around us more heavenly?
- **Where can it be born?** Identify **one** reconciling action we can commit to which will help to remove the Unreconciled ones from their hell on earth.
- **How can we nurture it?** How can we support that reconciling action and make sure it follows through?
- **What will we hope to see?** What will be changed at the end of this process and what difference should it have made?

## Going further

This resource is based on the chapter 'Heaven and Hell' in the book *Unreconciled?* where you can find lots of information, stories, and further ideas you can use for personal study or in a group, including more ideas for activities.

Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, (Jonathan Cape, 1989)  
 Mitch Albom, *The Five People you meet in Heaven* (Sphere, 2004)

The Daily Service on Radio 4 from April 11-14 offers more readings and reflections for you to listen to on the theme of order and disorder.

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Photo of *The Unreconciled* (The Cross and broken glass): CTBI / Vicki & Chuck Rogers / Phil Dragash 