

SERMON – 9 OCTOBER 2021 – HEBREWS 4.12-16, MARK 10.17-31

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.



“As Jesus was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him” – you can imagine it. Trying to get ready, trying to get sorted – and a man runs up. Jesus was used to people coming to him, probably used to people kneeling before him. A man who needs to talk, a man who has a burning question for the religious man. “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life.”

I was thinking it isn't a question I get asked much. People in the world we inhabit are doing OK with this life, so although they want some reassurance that death is not the end, they rarely seem to have any great desire to talk about much more. Even at a funeral visit, most people do not want to discuss what the future holds for their loved one. They are certain, as much as they need to be, that everything is OK. We talk about the practicalities of the service, of the burial, and sometimes I find it a struggle to get the conversation onto what I might describe as a more heavenly plain.



But then I have to ask myself what eternal life means to me. There's a lovely anthem by the wonderfully named Charles Hubert Hastings Parry called *Blest pair of sirens* – it was pretty regular in the Cathedral anthem cycle. It's a setting of an ode by Milton, and it ends with this phrase

O may we soon again renew that song,
 And keep in tune with Heav'n, till God ere long
 To His celestial concert us unite,
 To live with Him, and sing in endless morn of light

My heaven will be musical, but I do wonder what sort of music. I was at a recent conference where we started with 20 minutes of worship songs on the guitar. One of the songs contained a line about “singing for ten thousand years”.

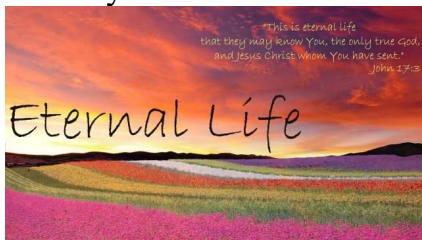
O God, I prayed, not ten thousand years of worship songs on the guitar. Then again, I'm not sure I want ten thousand years of Cathedral anthems either. Choral Evensong at St Edmund's last Sunday night was gorgeous, the only thing that spoiled it was when I turned east for the Creed and thought "blast, forget to light the candles on the altar before we started." At least in heaven, there's bound to be an angel who makes sure that job has been done! There's what will be another gorgeous Choral Evensong tonight at St Matthew's.



Of course, heaven will be deeper than music. I often use the prayer of John Donne

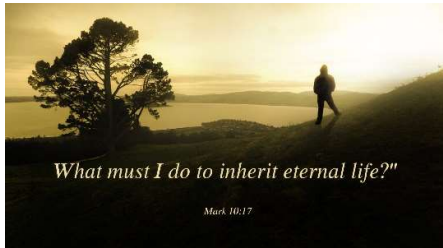
Bring us, O Lord God, at our last awakening,
 into the house and gate of heaven,
 to enter into that gate and dwell in that house,
 where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light;
 no noise nor silence but one equal music;
 no fears nor hopes but one equal possession;
 no ends nor beginnings but one equal eternity;
 in the habitations of thy Majesty and thy Glory,
 world without end. Amen.

Eternal life will be beauty – the Peak District at its best, the symmetry of a harvest flower, Creation writ large. It will be people – the lads I miss every day of my earthly life, somehow together again, though I don't understand in what form that will take. Will my little Theo still have Down's Syndrome – presumably not if heaven is perfection, but what will he be like. Who knows? One day I trust I will find out.



Eternal life will be God – sometimes I feel guilty because I want to see Gareth and Theo again more than I want to see Jesus – but I'm sure he understands. I expect to be in the presence of my Lord and Saviour, the Lord who has been with me in my darkest hours, the Lord who has held me, supported me – and

challenged and called me. The Lord who forgives me for my failures, my doubts, my lack of zeal. The Lord who loves me. We have a high priest who sympathizes with our weakness, and the last thing any of us need is a sense of guilt – much better that we are as excited by all this, as the man was in the gospel. Come to Christ, kneel and speak to him. “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life.”



“No one is good but God alone” – is the human Jesus challenging the man? Who do you say that I am? A challenge for us all.

You know the commandments, you know what you ought to do. “I have kept all these since my youth” – most of can say that (as much as any humans can). We wouldn’t say it as firmly though, would we, because we are all aware of our failures – yes, of course we are.

And would Jesus turn to us and make the same challenge. “You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”



O, we don’t want this, do we. It’s harvest – “all good gifts around us are sent from heaven above, so thank the, O thank the Lord, for all his love.” We can cope with that. Last week at St Edmund’s Harvest Festival we raised money for Christian Aid – I’m told it was a good morning, so thanks to Tom from Christian Aid, to Geoff for his hard work, to Julie for leading the service, thanks to those of you who took part, thanks to those who made sure church looked as beautiful as ever – we are very fortunate, and I am grateful, even if sometimes I forget to say so.

But of course that's not much – and we are all only too aware of the things we are not doing, especially at the moment. None of us are anywhere near “You lack one thing: go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” I wonder if we even comprehend what it is to be poor – I turned the heating on when we got back from holiday, the definition of privilege is that I can think “it's cold, turn the heating on” – so many in our country think “it's cold, can I afford to turn the heating on?”

We balance this demand of Jesus with his words elsewhere that you'll always have the poor with you, we balance it with Jesus at the wedding feast joining in the celebrations and producing the very best wine – we give thanks for friendship and fellowship, we celebrate that life is good – we use our wealth, our resources for the benefit of others. We know that fair trade is better than charity, that Just-ice ice cream changes lives, that God has given us so much and we do share it with others. Thank you for your generosity.

It is a challenge. It is a challenge for us, and it ought to be challenging if we are people who take our faith seriously. We are not saved because of what we do, we are saved because of the death of Jesus Christ. He went to the cross, he took the sin of the world, he defeated the darkness and the evil and all the things that stop this world being heavenly. There will come a time when it will all make sense, when we stop fighting the darkness, when the light triumphs. In the meantime, we do our best.

It won't be long before we light the advent ring. It won't be long before we light our Christingles, and however dark this winter is there is light in the darkness. Another funeral reading sums up my journey in the direction of heaven. You can probably guess which one it is:



The Gate of the Year, Minnie Louise Haskins

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:
“Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”
And he replied:
“Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”
So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the
night. And He led me towards the hills and the breaking of day in the
lone East.”

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