

Here are some isolated verses from John's Gospel:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Jn 3.16

The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. Jn 4.14

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day Jn 6.54

And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. Jn 17.3

This is only a selection of verses that have Jesus talking about eternal life.

It is, apparently, not true that Eskimo languages have up to a hundred words for snow. It seems that, like English, there are a few words for snow which describe its manner of falling, and then these can be split up into a wide selection of tenses and participles, leading to the assumption by those who don't speak Inuit languages that each word signifies something entirely different in regard to snow. It is as if we were to count up words like snow, snowing, snowed; frozen rain, raining ice; sleet, sleeting &c., &c., and we could come to a quite impressive total if we really could be bothered to try.

Those who know anything about the translation of languages will be aware that words in different languages – especially in those that are not directly related – very seldom cover exactly the same range of meaning. You have to become intimately aware of how people use a word, and in what situations, before you are able to translate it properly. This also applies to words which are borrowed by one language from another. And to complicate matters, their meanings get subtly changed over a period of time as the word is domesticated into a different context.

Two words in English which cause me some fascination are eternal and everlasting. They tend to be used interchangeably, yet eternal is derived from Latin, and everlasting is good old Anglo-Saxon, yet seems to be restricted to English alone, not to other Germanic languages. Cranmer quite often uses 'everlasting' for God in his translations of medieval Collect prayers, dare I suggest maybe because in the move to a fully vernacular liturgy he might want to avoid any suggestion of the old Latin words.

Yet if you look at it more closely, eternity as understood in the mirror of John's Gospel is something quite different from considering the possibility that the same thing might last, or go on, for ever.

There was a point when this distinction became important for me in my faith journey. I didn't – and don't – want to imagine my life as it is going on and on for ever. That would be quite insufferable (and not only to me I suspect...), a perfect example of life that would lose its quality sooner rather than later. Even for the most stable of human beings, life moves on; it is a journey; nothing ever stays the same; this is both interesting and exciting, and it always affords us something new to be discovered and learned. *Everlasting* life, then, wasn't for me.

But *eternal* life has a subtle difference. This is a life that shares whatever eternity is in the presence of God. I cannot think of anything that is more attractive – not because I can accurately picture what it is, but because it is so different – and, drawing on what I said on Monday about why God made me, it is actually what you and I are ultimately for. It completely fulfils our purpose.

The difficulty with all the images we are served with to depict eternal life is the same difficulty I find with calling it everlasting. The images are drawn from this life and mainly (though not always) represent an intensity of whatever it is we happen to find brings us pleasure and joy. I say not always, because I have in mind a wonderful Welsh hymn called *Côr Caersalem* (Jerusalem Choir) which takes up the image of the heavenly choir and then has us sing that the same choir has just stopped to listen to us because our singing is better again than theirs! A wonderful way I think to encourage people to sing at their best.

Images – both visual and in sound – of what happens after we die are countless. In the East Window of the Lesser Lady Chapel of this church, combined with images of the Purification/Presentation, there are examples of classical backgrounds with hill villages, and the inhabitants of such an imagined heavenly world. At the bottom sits a youth filled with the languid longing of his age, and above there are cherubim and seraphim busily singing and, it seems, also on the verge of quarrelling about whether they have the right notes or what has to be sung next. I find myself idly imagining that their faces are modelled after choristers of the late nineteenth century, when the windows were produced, and I certainly can see the faces of present and past choristers of my own acquaintance among them. It's the contrast between the know-it-all confidence of some and the diffident concern of others that brings these figures alive.

Those of us who have domestic animals will probably be aware of the 'rainbow bridge' concept which sees dead dogs and cats, rabbits and who knows what else crossing an imaginary bridge to a place where they can run free for ever.

Those who read contemporary obituaries will have often read injunctions such as 'Fly high'. And the regular number of conversations with visitors to this church – not to mention purchases in the church Gift Shop – which reveal through imagery and ideas a belief in what some are pleased to call the 'afterlife' is really astounding.

While it would be easy to dismiss all of these and more with the words of Chesterton that those who stop believing in God end up believing in anything, I think there *is* a lively and largely unfulfilled sense of hope that, despite appearances to the contrary, there is more to life as a whole than appears to the mortal mind and eye. There is a reason why spiritualism seems still to be flourishing when religion as a whole appears on the decline, and since we claim to have insights, if not complete answers, to the significance of death and life, this leaves me wondering why the soundbites and slogans used by churches in an attempt at inducing growth do not tend to include that particular Unique Selling Point, preferring to market the Church mainly as a religious base for a variety of social work. Curious – but very liable to start me up on an important hobby-horse that (to mix metaphors) is a red herring in this discussion.

There has been research into 'near-death' experiences (they have to be 'near death' of course, because had the individuals concerned died, they would not be describing their experiences to us) which establishes such phenomena as being pulled through a dark tunnel and various 'out of body' experiences. There is enough such research to suggest credibly that people dying can have a conscious awareness of the environment around them even after being pronounced clinically dead. Many report encountering what has been described as a 'being of light' emanating love and warmth, while some encounter a state of confusion where they cannot move on from the physical world.

While I would not want to draw any firm conclusions from such research, I would suggest that there is clear evidence here of an impulse to continuing life. This impulse, I think, is witnessed by various practices that stubbornly remain in our supposedly purely secular culture, and it is related to what are (unfortunately, in my view) described as more primitive customs and beliefs about death.

When friends of mine were working in the Diocese of Niassa in northern Mozambique, in among the very Catholic practices which had been handed down from the first English missionaries in that area, they encountered a very strong sprinkling of traditional religious practices around ancestor-worship. These had crystallised into a strong urge to celebrate Requiem Masses for and with the dead, using certain pagan symbolism mixed in with the Christian liturgy learned from the early missionaries. My friends were not especially at home with Catholic practices and beliefs around death, so I found myself having to advise on where the boundaries lay, and on how those celebrating the Requiem Mass could manage to keep their witness to Christian faith, accommodating some of the aspects of ancestor worship, yet avoiding the attention and inclusion of the witch doctors who claimed to have control over the fate of the dead and the living.

The most fascinating thing about this, I found, was the vivid awareness among those people of the continuing presence and nearness of those who had gone before them. To some Western Christians, this can appear to be on the heretical side of odd, yet both Catholic teaching, and aspects of folk-religion, even in these islands, can relate positively to this insight.

What I think I'm saying here is that there is plenty of evidence that human beings in general perceive, or want to perceive, a continuity of life across death, and this supports the observations I made on Sunday evening about life not being terminated by death. The obvious discontinuity of death is balanced by a perception of continuity which appears to be present in the most sceptical of societies.

On Sunday I mentioned that for the Hebrew faith at the time of Jesus the idea of a defined life beyond death seems to have been a fairly recent development, and pretty controversial at that. For those who believed in the resurrection, it was what some describe as a double resurrection: the just would rise to eternal life, and the unjust to eternal damnation. Some of the imagery used for both of these states appears in the gospels. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus, for example, sees the rich man subjected to eternal torment in fire because of his treatment of the poor, while Lazarus is carried off to rest peacefully in the bosom of Abraham.

The concept of a place where the dead rest with their ancestors may indeed be something which the Israelites took from their various conquerors, influenced by the Greek concept of Hades as a sort of shadow-life, and that may explain why groups like the Sadducees were so vigorously opposed to teaching on the resurrection. Sheol – the equivalent of Hades – was growing in concept to accommodate resurrection faith, so that in the rich man and Lazarus story, both of them are in departments of the same place, with the imagery for the just being taken from the righteousness of the Patriarch Abraham, while the imagery for the condemned is thought to have been taken from the perpetual fires which burned in the Gehenna rubbish-tip outside Jerusalem, so much so that Gehenna was the original title given to Hell.

Christian teaching on such matters depends obviously on resurrection faith, and it includes a concept of judgement at the point of death, a final judgement at the end of time, and the concepts of Heaven, Hell, and – controversially – Purgatory, where souls are cleansed from the sins which would otherwise condemn them to Hell, to a life without the presence of God.

I tend to refuse to rise to the bait when asked if I believe in all of the above. And I do so because – to resume a theme that has become common throughout these addresses – no one actually knows for sure. I am happy to believe in the possibility that eternal life can be spent in total fulfilment in God's presence with body and soul freed from the limitations of mortality. I am content (though not really happy – why should I be?) to believe in the possibility of the torment of unlimited existence deprived of the presence of

God. I am very happy to believe that God's mercy extends beyond our own limited view, beyond death, and that sin can still be forgiven and the individual prepared for life with God. And I cannot for one moment understand why people should get worked up over when the judgement will be, for as far as my mind can grasp it, once we go beyond the limitations of time and space, all time-limited ideas are off the table, and all space-limited ideas are out of the eternal window.

Throughout these addresses, I have offered a background critique of material science as understood by many in the last century. That critique is based on a crude understanding of Newtonian physics and its relevant mathematical models, and on their use by theologians including such important names as Teilhard de Chardin to map out an inexorable march forward of scientific knowledge such that humanity will ultimately know as much as God and be able to act accordingly. Just to prove that I am not actually anti-science, before I draw these talks to a close I want to indicate how helpful I find the basic insights of quantum theory, which – again during the last century – has come to encompass and overtake Newtonian physics as the most useful key to understanding the natural world.

I find it helpful because it indicates that reality is indeed not limited to time or space, but that these have themselves become relative concepts. It frees up the rational mind to perceive and understand that there is something more than that which can be defined by 'now and then' and 'here and there'. In short, it points to a world where time and eternity are not necessarily separate matters, and where the material dissolution of death can be understood as more than a disastrous collapse of all that makes us who we are. To use traditional language, I think that quantum theory allows for the existence of the human soul, not just as part of a separate mystical world of faith, but as a fluid reality along with mind and body.

And this makes sense to me of the greatest insight of all concerning eternal life: it is here! It is already here! It took this student almost to the end of his studies before the penny dropped, when a sermon preached by an English Jesuit reminded his congregation that eternal life doesn't start with death – in Christian faith, eternal life starts with baptism, and we are living it now. How we will experience it when we go beyond the 'then and now; and here and there' – well, like so many other things in the world, we don't actually know for certain. But if anything at all has come from these talks, I do hope that we can all accept that it's perfectly all right not to know for certain.

I hope that over the next few days we can all experience something that goes beyond words – the sense that in taking us with him beyond death, Christ has opened to us a reality that already is, and that will continue to attract us until we experience the presence of God beyond any of our imagining. A quiet night, a perfect end, an eternal beginning, still remain. Let us go home to those things tonight and as we do, let us take with us the words of the resurrection hymn:

Now is eternal life,
If risen with Christ we stand,
In him to life reborn,
And holden in his hand;
No more we fear death's ancient dread,
In Christ arisen from the dead.

Unfathomed love divine,
Reign thou within my heart;
From thee nor depth nor height,
Nor life nor death can part;
Our life is hid with God in thee,
Now and through all eternity.

PC, 5th April 2023