

A Homily/Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 1, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

## Heaven

In today's Gospel reading (Luke 12: 13-21) we hear Jesus telling us that we need to take care that we are investing our time, treasure, and talent in the eternal realm of HEAVEN; not in the temporary, transitory illusions of this earthly existence. While that sounds like good advice, what does it really mean? I've never seen a building named "First National Bank of Heaven" in which I'm invited to make a deposit. Heaven is hard for us to even imagine. We grow up with mental pictures of angels floating around on clouds and strumming harps, streets paved with gold and gushing fountains of life-giving water and circles of torches with everlasting flames, surrounding a jeweled throne where God is seated in glory along with Jesus and all the Biblical patriarchs. Being told that we should lay up our treasures in that childhood fantasy is advice that I, for one, find very hard to take seriously.

I'm forced either to reject what Jesus is saying or I have to reexamine the whole idea of what Heaven is. For me, that took a lot of serious thought and prayer and this morning what I want to do is share some of that process with you. I do that in the hope that you may find a different approach, one that offers you some fresh insight into what Jesus is asking of us...and that a different approach may even lead you into some new ways not simply of thinking but, more importantly, new ways of living your life.

So let's begin with some basic questions. The first one is this: WHAT IS HEAVEN? I've already suggested to you that most of the mental images that you probably have been carrying around—all that pearly gate and angels strumming harps—aren't very helpful to modern humanity. I'm not really sure where those pictures come from. They certainly aren't biblical. Oh, sure, there is such poetic and symbolic language in the Bible. But whoever wrote The Book of Revelation would, I'm sure, be amazed and surprised if someone were to tell him that we actually took such imagery literally—something to be understood as a concrete description of reality. The first step in answering the question *What is Heaven?* is that we need to reverently and graciously put aside all the popular and pious notions of Heaven that we carry from childhood as unbiblical, unscientific, unreal, and—honestly, when you think about it—undesirable. The last thing I would wish for myself is to spend eternity playing a harp during a succession of endless Sabbaths, as one of our Episcopal hymns so frighteningly puts it. I'm certainly not going to invest my time, talent, and treasure to achieve that goal...and, I'm convinced, Jesus wouldn't want me to!

Now, I know that lots of fine people and committed Christian would disagree with me and would challenge what I've been saying here by asking, "How do you know, since no one's been there and returned to tell us what Heaven is like?" Well, as a Christian myself, I would have to say that such a question is a rather glib way of responding to the challenge that I've laid down. Actually everything that I do know of Heaven has come to me from one who has, in fact, been there and who has come to us to tell us all about Heaven. If you believe that Jesus is the One

who has come from God—the “only begotten Son” as we say each week in our Creed, then we need to pay attention to what he can tell us from his firsthand experience. When you look at the New Testament you will discover that the vast burden of the teachings of Jesus deal directly with what Heaven is all about. You may think that Jesus spent a lot of time telling people how to behave—do this or don't do that—but, in fact, that's not true. Jesus devotes fully 90% of his teachings to parables, stories, and examples of what the Kingdom of God is like. He says that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, like a householder, like a certain woman. He's telling us what Heaven is. He's saying that Heaven is a state of existence in which God's will and purpose are fully realized—a state of being in which we experience **nothing but** the forgiveness, love, and fellowship of God—a state in which we are part of a fellowship that is shared by a community made whole and fulfilled.

So, let's move on to the second question that I'd like to explore with you today: WHERE IS HEAVEN? Once again, we have to brush away some long and largely uncritically held notions. Is there anybody in his right mind living in this Twenty-first Century who thinks that if we shot a rocket up high enough we would land in Heaven? Or that, if we dug down far enough, we'd eventually wind up in Hell? Those primitive poetic descriptions clearly come out of a pre-scientific notion of a flat three-story universe that had no other way to explain things. What I want to suggest to you is that, it seems to me that Heaven is better understood not as a PLACE but as a STATE OF BEING, that the terms “Heaven” and what Jesus spoke of as “The Kingdom of God” are synonymous.

To me, it makes sense that wherever God's vision of all of us living in love, compassion, and service is realized, THERE is Heaven. That loving purpose—to bring all life into unity, wholeness, health, and harmony—is the culmination of God's will for us and for the whole Creation. In short, we are all on a journey toward Heaven. Where is it? Heaven is anywhere, everywhere—not yet fully realized, not complete, but very much in-the-making. God is all about us and always engaged in showing us glimpses of Heaven **if** our eyes are open to see it. The challenge to us everyday and every moment is to believe in that possibility and, as Jesus challenges us in our Gospel reading today, “lay up our treasure” in that imperishable and emerging truth.

Which brings me to the final question. My third question is this: WHEN IS HEAVEN? If anything of what I've been saying makes sense then we are forced to conclude that, contrary to whatever we may have thought, Heaven is already here—right NOW. Heaven is not limited to some “pie in the sky” when you're “dead and gone.” Heaven begins right here and now for those who understand what it means to invest ourselves fully in God's loving purposes. Actually, when you think about it, we recognize that all the time. Consider how many times we say of something that just happened, “That was sheer Hell”. We read a book called One Foot in Heaven. We sing a spiritual with words that say, “I've heard of a city called Heaven and I've started to make it my home.” All around us there are clues pointing to the great truth that Heaven starts here, building as we invest in its reality, until it becomes our all-in-all. Heaven is a present reality with eternal dimensions, something we live into until it becomes completely who we are, always and ever.

Three thoughts then, thoughts about Heaven which seem to me crucially important to anyone who even hopes to make sense of what it means to be faithful to Christ. These are not merely my personal thoughts. They are my attempt to lay out truths freed from the trappings of poetry and mythology, well-considered biblical thoughts about what it might mean to “lay up for yourself treasures in Heaven:”

What is Heaven? Heaven is a state of being in which the Kingdom of God is at work.

Where is Heaven? Heaven exists wherever the loving purposes of God are transforming his world into the harmony, health, and unity toward which God is calling the whole Creation.

When is Heaven? It can begin here and now and it will last forever—if that’s what you choose.

There is, of course, another important question, a question that I can’t answer. Only you can answer this one. Simply put, the ultimate question is this: WHERE ARE **YOU**?