



CAN HEAVEN WAIT?

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Ignorance is very brash. And so I am daring to speak about Heaven, of what could be the fulness of life in God's Kingdom, beyond history, beyond space, beyond the time in which we live our biological life. And of what this Heaven has to do with our world.

I don't claim to do anything more than share my reflections and the images that help me to think about and enjoy this Heaven. I hope they can be of some modest use to others.

In this case it is doubly true that what we can say about God is more difference with reality than similarity to it. But I believe that, even through images and words inevitably myopic and ambiguous, it is still possible to communicate the hope, joy and dream of what faith holds out to us as a Promise.

I. HEAVEN CANNOT WAIT

In a world like ours, that lives so glued to the earth, so concerned with what can bring us tangible benefits, not to say ready cash, it would seem little less than impertinent to speak about something like “Heaven”. The theme may seem of scarce interest to us; perhaps it elicits a well-intentioned smile of pity. But perhaps this theme may confront us with questions we have neglected to ask ourselves and which it would be interesting and useful to ask afresh, even though knowing we won’t get “clear and distinct” answers.

1. To dare to reopen an old question

To ask oneself about “Heaven” is to ask oneself about the meaning and ultimate destiny of all we know: of ourselves, our dearest friends, the planet we claim to love when we talk of ecology, of humanity we worry about when lamenting or discussing war and injustice. All that we love, every man or woman who occupies a place in our hearts and our concerns, is a good reason for questioning oneself again about what we have called “Heaven”. Yet we have to admit it is a difficult subject. The very expression (“Heaven”) throws us back to childish language, as if declaring we were taking up questions that have always resisted the “adult” consideration of Modernity. But perhaps this is based on a false concept of adulthood, something artificial or secondhand: a pseudo-adulthood which to avoid dreams renounces dreaming, which in order to explain things denies the mysterious, instead of learning to contemplate the mystery of things, face to face without fear: though this supposes accepting there are many questions we can’t explain, perhaps precisely the most important things.

“Some people are killjoys”, remarked a friend about a third person little given to smiling or dreaming, “but there are also people who kill the child within us”. Perhaps we have “killed the child within us” on the pretext of “efficiency” or a false idea of “realism”. Perhaps, numbed by a thousand daily cares or overwhelmed by the pressing problems of our world, we have forgotten to leave a place in our lives for dreams, for hope, for gentleness. And perhaps we don’t realise that this saps our vitality, our creativity, our capacity to be happy and enjoy life in depth, beyond immediate needs and consumer satisfaction. Perhaps it would be good to reawaken the child within us and let it look at our world and our loved ones and so refind the sparkle of hope that certainly shines in its eyes.

Clearly this is not a question of being taken in by the promise of a sweet, but rather of rescuing what is most alive and alert within us. To rescue an attitude which hopes for much from life, from the world and from others; and which hopes much for life, for the world and for others. An outlook which keeps alive a flame of curiosity, of searching, of desire...

This is the place to set out on the path of searching for Heaven, for the ultimate destiny of things and people. Because it is a question of wakening ourselves from a sort of lethargy, of laziness and of being stifled. Saturated by all that we can consume, we are stifled. Discouraged by failures in our struggle for a more just and humanitarian world, we have become sluggish. Our ideals lulled by songs of powerlessness whispered in our ears, we are benumbed. And so it is not an age for utopias but for conformity; not a time for rebelliousness but for resignation.

In our days some thinkers have proclaimed “the end of history”, just as in another age others proclaimed “the death of God”. For he who stops dreaming of his goal, ends by ceasing to walk. And he who ceases to walk, doesn’t get anywhere. For all this I believe it important to speak again of Heaven, for one more time. This is why I think that “Heaven cannot wait”.

It is true that the images of Heaven in current use are not very stimulating: fields of small clouds where people dressed in white tunics walk among baroque angels don’t seem capable of adding much to our lives. And yet a person so serious (in the noblest and least boring sense of the word) as Jesus of Nazareth dedicated his preaching and his life (to the point of losing it in the attempt) to announcing the Kingdom of God, which is what, in a much poorer expression, we now call “Heaven”.

In the following pages we will try to compare our picture of “Heaven” with what Jesus announced. Perhaps this comparison will throw some new light on the matter and help us approach it better. And perhaps in this way we will discover that this “Ultimate Meaning”, Heaven or, better from now on, the “Kingdom of God” has an importance, a depth and a capacity for attraction and incentive incomparably greater than those sugary and Hollywood-style images that we were right to reject as childishness. Perhaps, in the end, we will discover it is worthwhile believing.

2. “Tell me the type of Heaven you hope for, and I will tell you what sort of world you are building”

I believe that man is a being who lives tortured by an almost infinite thirst for happiness. A thirst perhaps denied, or perhaps disguised under more or less elaborate masks. But we are beings who are open, not closed; projected beyond ourselves, not circular; stretched out towards the future by desire. To live is to walk. And we walk led on by the good, by beauty and truth. We can call it by a thousand names, but none will succeed in satisfying us fully. But whatever the case, man is a being who walks to reach a Horizon. Except that, tired or in despair, he sits down by the roadside to “pass time”, to “kill time”, to wait for death.

There is no man really alive without a horizon towards which he is walking. This horizon doubtless has many different forms and names. For the poor it will be dignity and justice, for the hungry bread, for the tormented peace of mind, for the lover the woman loved, for the prisoner freedom, for the bored future hope. And so it is with Mankind as a

whole. We aspire to live in a world where there is peace, justice and brotherhood. We are horrified by war, cruelty, injustice. And so society is tireless in searching for solutions to its problems: unemployment, terrorism, poverty, etc. In the same way at a global level, we try to reduce poverty in the Third World, to do away with wars, to abolish religious fundamentalism. We want to live in a world in peace and harmony, just as we want peace and harmony in our family and in ourselves.

And everyone on a journey knows that, as one advances along the road, the horizon stretches out and becomes another horizon further on. And so it happens with our desires and aspirations. When a problem has been solved, there crops up another reason for concern, another greater desire beyond what has already been achieved. The horizon retreats. A song of Joan Manuel Serrat reminds us of this in its gentle and sarcastic tone:

*«I set a course for the horizon
and didn't stop for anything,
anxious to arrive
where the waves wash the clouds...
But the more I pushed on ahead
the further it remained,
the faster I went
the further there was to go.»*

When slavery was abolished, the proletariat was born. When social security schemes were set up in western countries, it became necessary to create unemployment benefits and then a legal minimum wage. Each gain confronted us with new challenges, new needs. It all happens as if these horizons were reflections or expressions of some ultimate Horizon, longed for in the very depth of our hearts. Basically we want happiness, harmony, peace... We want to reach the Horizon and remain living in it.

Every culture and every religion has expressed in its own way this relationship between man and his ultimate Horizon. They have been called "Utopia", "Paradise", a "socialist state", a "Super-Man". They have been described as "Solidarity", "Freedom-Equality-Brotherhood", "Nirvana". Jesus called it the "Kingdom of God", taking an expression from his own jewish religious tradition. There are a thousand names which correspond to the same thirst, the same desire, the same aspiration.

But though they correspond to the same intimate reality of the human being, they are not all equal, at least in principle. Each of these concepts (or others we could add to the list) is not only a different description of the same reality, is not only a matter of name. Behind each of them there are different ways of understanding the relationship between the human being and his or her ultimate Horizon. And these differences are much more important than one might think in a first superficial assessment. Because if man is a being walking towards his Horizon, the relationship he establishes with that Horizon profoundly influences his way of walking.

To give a sadly topical example, the blind fearlessness of the islamic extremist suicide terrorists is based on the conviction they will be carried to a paradise of happiness

and received there as heroes. This is one concrete way in relating oneself to the ultimate Horizon. For them, perhaps simplifying a little, the Horizon is a place or personal situation in which one enjoys pleasure and happiness as a reward gained by the sacrifice of one's life in a war.

It is a vision determined by what is "Heaven" and, above all, by what relation it bears with this world, the life of here and now. This life is a war in which any sacrifice, one's own or another's, is justified, and in "Heaven" one will rejoice in all that has been sacrificed in carrying out this war.

As we can see, this way of understanding "Heaven" conditions much of what we do "on earth". So, to transform "the earth", it is also necessary to transform "Heaven", that is our way of relating to it. It is not surprising therefore that the Apocalypse speaks of "a new heaven and a new earth". The two are related, are a reflection of each other.

If, then, the way in which we understand the Horizon and relate to it is going to affect the way we walk, if the way we understand Heaven is going to affect our way of being on earth, it is worth stopping to consider what is "our Heaven". Perhaps we can imitate the popular saying in the words: "tell me what Heaven you are waiting for, and I will tell you what world you are building." And this is also valid for those who say they don't believe in any "Heaven" since, to believe in no Heaven, is already a specific way of relating to the final Horizon, and has its consequences in the way we meet challenges, problems and personal hopes, as well as collective and social ones.

And so, for the christian faith, what is significant is not only the fact of believing in "Heaven" but also how we believe in it. There can be no doubt that the image we have of this Heaven and the way we relate to it is just as important as the fact that it exists. Let us then try to establish what Horizon Jesus had and how he related to it.

II. HEAVEN HASN'T WAITED

We have already said that Jesus never spoke of “Heaven” but, in every instance, of the “Kingdom of Heaven” or its equivalent the “Kingdom of God”. This is not an original idea of Jesus but present from of old in the Jewish and Israelite tradition. We will not stop here to explain in detail the content of this expression. The interested reader can readily find this in other writings.

The expression indicates a situation in which God reigns and not the thousand and one tyrannies which submit the human being to every type of alienation. For the Kingdom of God is a situation of full reconciliation of man with himself, with other human beings, and with his world. The gospels, in a powerful image based on the teaching of Jesus, speak of this Kingdom as a banquet prepared by God and to which each and every man and woman is invited. It is thus a situation of joy overflowing with brotherhood.

1. The Kingdom announced by Jesus

So far the Christian picture of Heaven, of the final Horizon of human life, is not very different from the other pictures: it concerns the Horizon of total happiness for the human being, the fulfilment of the heart's deepest desires.

It is important to note from the outset that the Kingdom announced by Jesus has certain characteristics. In the first place, we are not dealing with a purely spiritual Kingdom. It is a Kingdom which embraces man in his many dimensions: economic, corporal, moral, social, religious, etc. As such it supposes a liberation of man from all slavery, internal and external, personal and social. The “Heaven” Jesus spoke about is not “only for the soul”, but for the whole person in all his or her completeness.

In consequence of this, the Kingdom of God is not only an individual Heaven but necessarily social and comunitarian, for a person cannot be a person without those to whom he or she relates, or lives with, or loves. Would Heaven be Heaven, so to speak, for Groucho Marx without Harpo and Chico... and without Margaret Dumont? A philosopher said that “hell is other people”... I don't agree. In reality our Heaven is other people.

Well then, a Kingdom which does not consist in isolated individuals presupposes, according to the most elementary experience, a profound process of reconciliation, an authentic and radical revolution. Without such a revolution, how could we imagine Bin Laden and Mr Bush sitting at the same table? How could we convince the “*Madres de Mayo*” to share a banquet with those who tortured their sons? How could a child dying of hunger in some part of Africa raise a toast to the dealer who manipulates millions of dollars on the international financial markets?

This is why preaching the Kingdom of God is deeply revolutionary and acts as a goad constantly claiming freedom for victims of any type of injustice. For the same reason the Kingdom of God implies an urgency to transform our world in all its ecological, economic, social and political reality.

In what we have just said we find two important aspects of the final Horizon proposed by christian faith: it is a Horizon which includes the whole man, both personal and social. And so we have to reject a situation in which only spiritual values are promoted (spiritualism) or in which only material well-being is cultivated (materialism). It is rather a question of trying to integrate in some way the material and the spiritual, body and soul, so as to achieve harmony.

We also have to reject any project in which happiness is understood as something individual that does not include the happiness of others. Returning to the example of the suicide terrorist, what sort of Heaven can someone who sows pain in such a brutal manner in exchange for future happiness, aspire to? An *individual* or “tribal” Heaven which excludes the “infidels”, the “others”. With such a Heaven, we will end by creating (or rather, devastating) a land, like the flattened land of the Twin Towers.

Or, another example, those who place their happiness in personal well-being or “enjoying life” (in its most basic sense) without giving importance to moral and spiritual values, or those who dedicate the best part of their life to “social success” (an expression that in fact usually means “economic success”). Are not these the people who, in pursuit of such a Horizon, have no hesitation in exploiting their neighbour or speculating with goods that are vital for many people in economically weak situations? Or, at the other extreme (though often with similar results), those religious people who believe in a “purely spiritual” Heaven, do they pay any attention to the material aspects of the lives of others?

2. “The Kingdom of Heaven has already come”

We have already established that the Heaven (of Jesus) is something that is not only material and not only spiritual. Now we must mention something that is very characteristic in Jesus’s preaching and to which he himself attached great importance, according to the witness of the Gospels. And it is that Heaven *is already here, in the world*. It seems that it was precisely this that formed the nucleus of his preaching. Mark’s gospel sums up Jesus’s preaching in the following sentence: “The Kingdom of God is close at hand: repent, and believe the Good News” (Mk 1,15). And this message was Jesus’s originality, so to speak.

In jewish tradition, people were certainly waiting for the setting up of the Kingdom of God, for the realisation of Utopia. Throughout the history of Israel several prophetic movements had announced the realisation of this Utopia of justice and brotherhood. They had announced its future realisation and even its proximate coming. But only Jesus dared affirm, announce, proclaim that Utopia *was already here!*

I consider it important to weigh up carefully this boldness of Jesus. Imagine that, in our day of scepticism and the pursuit of petty personal pleasures, a man appeared (and a poor uneducated man, to boot) proclaiming Utopia is among us, is already here, and that we only have to open our eyes (and hearts) to live it, see it, touch it... What a message! Who would believe it? Wouldn't we take him for a madman, a visionary, an imposter? All these accusations his contemporaries made against Jesus. And we shouldn't be surprised. Because it so happens this is central to the Gospel and our christian faith. The Kingdom of God is already here! This is what Jesus proclaimed. If one is able to believe in Jesus... is not this really Good News, the Best News that could be given to mankind?

I think this is an extremely important question. We live without believing in almost anything. We see wars, epidemics, injustices, and we are not even capable of dreaming of a Utopia, albeit it a future one. But Jesus affirms not only that Utopia will come but that it is already here now. To live in it (to "enter the Kingdom", in his words) all that is needed is a *conversion*, a change of heart, opening one's eyes and *believing* in the Gospel, trusting in this Good News.

Consequently it is possible to find happiness in this life. And it is not only possible, but even simple for the person who finds the way. Jesus himself says so: "the Kingdom of God is within you" (Lk 17,21). One doesn't have to go far to look, it is nothing complicated. It is difficult to enter in because it is so simple.

The christian Utopia, then, is different from other ways of understanding utopia because it believes in a utopia *already present* in the history of each person and of mankind. Thus there is always hope for everyone and in every situation. Because the Kingdom of God is also there, perhaps hidden, but present nonetheless: we are invited to discover it. This provides (or should provide) a basically hope-filled approach for facing personal and corporate problems. It is profoundly unchristian to say "nothing can be done" or "this has no solution". On the contrary, faith in Jesus leads us to think precisely that there is a solution. And not only is there a solution, but it is a solution that, in some way, is already present. Reality hides abilities and means that push it towards progress. We must search for and find these means, stimulate and strengthen them.

To give an example, we could speak of the problem of ill treating women. One could resign oneself, saying that "such ill-treatment has always existed and always will exist as long as men are men". With this the road to solving the problem is blocked and one is conveniently uninvolved. But if one believes the Kingdom is already here, one will discover the victims of ill-treatment have a desire for happiness and that, from this desire, steps can be taken to denounce the wrong and protect the victim. It is necessary to encourage this desire and support the person. It will also be seen the majority of people think such abuses abhorrent; so the communication media can be used to raise the conscience of society. Utopia is already present in every situation. It needs to be discovered and strengthened so that it becomes reality. This is a way of understanding the Horizon which generates hope and mobilizes constructive energy.

So it cannot be christian to look on Utopia as something totally failed, as in the "burnt earth" policy of maoist-type revolutions. To demolish all that exists in order to start

building again from zero because nothing can be saved. Nor can such “solutions” as the death penalty be considered christian because they don’t give an opening to any problem but eliminate all hope of a solution. And we can apply this argument to many other situations we encounter.

3. The earth transformed

Finally it is interesting to note that, if the Kingdom is present *here and now*, it means that this Kingdom *is formed out of our own personal and collective history*, however limited and even miserable this might sometimes appear to us. Because “Heaven has not waited”. God has not waited until the end of history to start his banquet. God’s love is impatient and is not going to wait for some special sign or other to begin to work.

This invites us to look at *our earth* with great reverence: our world and each person in it. A picture of Heaven which separates us from our beloved earth is not a christian one. The disciple of Jesus learns that the inextinguishable flame of God’s presence lights every situation and event. It is a presence that is alive and at work. The presence of someone always animating reality, carrying it forward, stimulating it and making it grow. No person is totally helpless, no aspiration worthless. There is no one who does not deserve to be looked at with respect and admiration, with love! What a lot of good it would do us to “open our eyes” to this mystery which is at the heart of every reality! It would enable us to consider each situation in a new way, excited, hopeful, creative: it would lead us to *believe* in others and in the possibilities of our own lives. Is this not the faith Jesus is asking for, the *faith* that can “move mountains”? “To believe in God” means, therefore, to believe in the possibilities for good of every person and every situation. To believe in Heaven, in the manner of Jesus, roots us in our own world. It roots us *deeply*, and not superficially. The disciple of Jesus cannot be content with embracing the surface of our world but rather its very heart, not with lips of flesh but with the living flesh of the heart.

To contemplate the hidden beauty of every created thing and every human being is to embrace from the depth of the heart and experience a joy without limit. To believe in Heaven *in this way* is deeply stimulating and a source of great hope and joy.

III. HEAVEN HAS TO WAIT

Reading all this, one might be led to think: “Its all very nice, but it is nothing more than a beautiful fairy tale”. For we have all experienced the hardness of life, things which fill us with pain and sorrow. War, that seemingly permanent companion to humanity, as if we were unable to learn its terrible lessons. Or the more blatant injustices, the exploitation of the weak by the strong, and all sorts of abuses. Or natural disasters, illness, premature death. The resistance the Horizon seems to put up as we get near it. We walk and walk but never reach it: “The nearer I get, the more distant it becomes”.

This experience in life can lead us, and has led many, to stop believing. So as not to be disappointed, it is better not to hope for much. Why strive for a Utopia that never comes. And not only does it not come but sometimes seems to be as far away as on the first day. What despair these sad days to see the bombers over Iraq! It seems there is no solution for our world, however much we work for one.

1. “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a seed”

Jesus and his disciples were asked the same question. Listening to Jesus announcing this Kingdom which is already among us, many would think it is not so obvious. If the Kingdom is already here, what is the meaning of all this grief, oppression, futility? Was Jesus blind to all this? No, Jesus was a realist, not a mistaken dreamer. He experienced in his own flesh what cannot be called the Kingdom of God. The cry of a broken and suffering humanity, the groan of pain, injustice confronted him too as a challenge to hope. And Jesus gave his reply which expresses a key part of how he “lived Heaven”.

«The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field. It is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the biggest shrub of all and becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and shelter in its branches».

“The Kingdom of Heaven is like the yeast a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour till it was leavened all through». (Mt 13)

This means that whoever is looking for the Kingdom should not seek a big tree but a minute seed, not bread but yeast. Heaven has not delayed: it is already present among us and we can already enjoy it. But we cannot hope to find more than its seed, its yeast. There are many trees in the wood of our world, some decaying, some dazzling, others decrepit, others overweening. Perhaps we allow ourselves to be taken in by them: the tree of power or money, of comfort, of wellbeing, of social or professional success, or of so many other idols we set up in our search for happiness. None of them by themselves are going to lead us to our final Horizon, to Utopia. We will have to lower our sights from the big and

brilliant tree-tops of our time and look on the ground for that seed which, although now next to nothing, is full of future hope.

Let us look at history. The history of Empires which believed they would last for ever and deliver “Heaven” to mankind: Rome with its *pax romana*, Spain with its catholic mission, the United States with its new order and American way of life. Not to mention the Russian Revolution and its communist paradise, or Naziism and its Third Reich... or a Bin Laden and his islamic State. So many milleniarist systems that have promised Heaven here below... and have ended up bringing hell!

The difference with the “already here” of Jesus is that these systems promised the Heaven they were creating would be acheived *fully here below*: they announced a tree, not a seed. But history gives the lie to milleniarist systems. Utopia cannot be *fully* acheived within our history. This is an experience repeated many times and which should serve us as a permanent vaccine. However splendid the trees of our history, they are born, give their fruit, and then decay and die. It is not they that are the Horizon, the End of History.

So it is a question of walking towards Utopia in the hope of reaching it but without believing we will reach it *in our present history*. We can already live now “in Heaven”, but like someone who is walking towards it, not someone who has arrived. We can live now in solidarity and brotherhood, but a struggling brotherhood not one that has already triumphed. But it is still brotherhood. Because to walk towards brotherhood is to live a brotherhood that is possible, to experience the first fruits of brotherhood. To prepare a banquet is to anticipate already the feast.

2. “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard”

Furthermore, walking towards Utopia in the hope of achieving it without pretending it is already achieved, frees us from the tendency to dominate Utopia, to build a utopia according to our own measurements. Because Heaven is that which “eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man to imagine” (1 Cor 2,9). To desist from *dominating Utopia* leaves open the possibility for surprise, for unimaginable wonder, it is to accept that reality can be better than fiction, that life surpasses our dreams. For our dreams, however tremendous they may be, fall short. God is much more splendid than our dreams, at the same time as being much more humble. For our dreams can be at the same time both conceited and myopic.

This is why, whenever man has tried to *programme Utopia*, to construct an ideal preconceived brave new world, he has ended up creating hells. We gave a few examples of these above. The reason is that, to programme Utopia, is to create a limited utopia, when the human heart is in God’s image and aspires towards infinity: it needs spaces where it can walk without having to stop, where it can lose itself without ever having to arrive in harbour. Isn’t the wonderful thing about friendship the realisation that, the more one knows one’s friend, the greater the space for movement and the more unattainable the other appears? Is not loving to give oneself to another who, precisely for being another, can never be fully possessed but rather the exact opposite? In the same way, to reach the Horizon should be

nothing else than opening an infinite space in which to rejoice without limit, to give oneself without limit. This is why a horizon preconceived by ourselves can never be the ultimate Horizon. Because beyond the boundary, there will always be another horizon.

And so, to live here below “in Heaven”, is to enjoy the goodness of all things but in such a way that we remain open to the presence of a mystery. To enjoy happiness here is to enjoy something that is open and not exhaustive. This means that, when we plan and work to build a utopia, we do so feeling our way, discovering the path at each step. This is why the Kingdom of God is a seed, a germ, a possibility that has to be developed, rather than something already complete and closed, of which we may have plans, even though they are plans signed by the best of Architects.

And so it happens in history. The advances and victories of humanity over inhumanity are not something programmed but rather letting humanity emerge from our best resources. And perhaps we will be the first to be surprised, like those Israelis who sang in psalm 126:

*«When Yahweh brought Zion’s captives home,
at first it seemed like a dream;
then our mouths filled with laughter
and our lips with song.»*

When the struggle for a more just world is lived in this way, open to the mystery of a reality we don’t yet know, we experience also that Utopia is more a gift received than a conquest or the result of our own work. It is the pearl that is found rather than the fruit of my efforts. It is principally the work of God, even though it cannot be achieved without the work of man. Man’s contribution is the work that loosens chains to let life grow through its own power. And the result is surprising and wonderful. So walking toward Utopia is to let oneself be amazed by what life can give us, way beyond our own expectations. Remaining open to receive gifts. In this way, Heaven also *must be hoped* for and not conquered. And so to enter the Kingdom is a motive for joy and gratitude. And also love.

3.Wheat and darnel

And so one has to wait for Heaven, one has to be patient. Our history is and always will be ambiguous. History is “wheat and darnel”. We cannot wait for a field free of darnel because we will end up without any wheat. To attempt to uproot all the darnel whatever the cost could lead to there being nobody left in the world. For “let him who has no sin throw the first stone”. He who strives for Utopia must provide himself with patience, understanding and the capacity to forgive as much as or even more than the desire for good. He has to be able to love a world that is ambiguous. Otherwise the darnel of our world will end by embittering his heart with resentment, or oblige him to abandon the effort. Anyone who has laboured long in a just cause can give witness to this.

The model and source of this patience and forgiveness is the Patience and Forgiveness of God. Before we begin to hope for Heaven, it is Heaven itself that *has to*

hope in order to become real. When, in the face of incomprehensible injustice or suffering, we turn towards Heaven angry and full of impatience, we don't realise that it is God who has the strongest motives for despair. It is God who has waited and continues waiting to carry out "all that He has prepared for those who love him." (ICor, 2) But God has patience and knows how to wait in silence. He knows that Heaven has to wait.

Utopia is not built by eradicating all that is evil in our world and beginning again from zero. Utopia is built rather through reconciliation. God's Patience is an embrace which accepts both wheat and darnel. Jesus shows this clearly in his life, especially at the end. The christian Heaven is thus a resurrection, a *getting up from the dead*. God doesn't abolish death but embraces and overcomes it. He takes it on in such a way that it has become possible to say: "Death, where is your sting?" (ICor, 15). This calls to mind the words of our creed:

*«He was crucified, dead and buried,
he descended into hell,
and on the third day he rose again from the dead,
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father.»*

Jesus did not ascend into Heaven without draining our chalice. Jesus did not shun the hells of humanity. Jesus confronted them, overcame them and reconciled them: he melted their hardness, warmed their coldness, lighted up their darkness. Otherwise the hells would not have been redeemed. For this reason, the Risen Lord carried the signs of his passion, the wounds in his hands and feet, and his side. The christian Heaven is a banquet of the resurrected, that is, of the crucified and resurrected.

In the Kingdom the signs of this world's pain and injustice remain. But they are transfigured, healed. In God's Kingdom "the wolf lives with the lamb, the panther lies down with the kid, calf and lion cub feed together" (Is 11). When, in God's Banquet, Yasser Arafat and Ariel Sharon embrace each other, the death and suffering in today's Palestine will not have been magically rubbed out but rather transformed into a means for union. It is a transformation that comes from reconciliation, achieved through repentance, tears, the recognition of injustice, the repairing of evil, opening up to the other. What happened will always be, but no longer as a cause of pain and hatred, rather the memory of a past accepted, forgiven: the story of a brotherly relation replacing a hostile one. The struggle for Utopia and justice, in its deepest reality, is a work of reconciliation. We should never forget this.

And so the history of our world is an easter history. As Jesus was crucified and rose to life, so our world is crucified each day and rises to life each day. Human history is not linear, like a continual and rising progress. It is rather a history of smiles and tears, of successes and failures, of death and resurrection.

And this is why there is Heaven for both victims and executioners. Heaven for the victims includes a restoration for the injustices committed against them, a giving back of their scorned dignity. For the executioners, Heaven supposes their conversion: breaking a

crust of stone to allow a heart of flesh to beat, asphyxiated beneath, because God “turns rock into pool, flint into fountain” (Ps 114, 8).

And so, considering our history full of unpaid debts, it is not surprising that christian tradition speaks of the need for a purgatory: a job of reconciliation still to be completed. Victims and executioners will sit at the same table, and that is not possible without a painful process to put things in their place and cure the wounds of history. A process which has to begin here and now.

For all this, the struggle for justice is both a commitment and a hope. It requires as much from our involvement as from our ability to believe in the possibility of achievement. And it should be a struggle shot through with joy, gratitude and, in no less degree, with patience, understanding and good humour.

IV. IN THE HEART OF HEAVEN

*"I saw the holy city...
beautiful as a bride all dressed for her husband" (Rv 21)
"They will see him face to face and his name will be written
on their foreheads" (Rv 22)*

As we have already said, the Kingdom of God we await and whose first fruits we already experience here is like a Banquet. A banquet is not an impersonal orgy, nor a free buffet where one can eat till sated, nor a motorway self-service to replenish strength in a rapid and practical manner. More than anything else it is an initiative of a generous person who invites friends. In such a banquet the least important is what is on the table: what matters are those who are seated at the table and what brings them together.

Cinema fans will remember how that magnificent supper in *Babette's Feast*^{*} takes place, almost from nothing, from the imagination and grateful affection of the French cook. In that supper, the exquisite dishes offered reflect Babette's spirit: a spirit that is dedicated, full of attention, generous. And all this comes from the cook's attentive hand. It is this spirit that opens up the guests to reconciliation and friendship. And this friendship takes on such a strength that one can almost say the table and what is on it disappear. The feast consists in the unity among the guests. Is not this the purpose, the inner meaning, expressed to a greater or lesser degree, of any celebration or feast?

The Kingdom of Heaven should be something similar. A Banquet in which the creative and loving hand of God is clearly visible in everything. The dream of a huge table at which the whole of mankind is seated, the whole of creation, invited by the Love that created them and led them there. And at such a table, clearly the most important thing is what brings the guests together. What is on the table and even the personalities of those seated at it are converted into a pure channel of communication, a total "I love you". So it is in Heaven that all the things, all the people, will be pure reflections of love, as if abandoning themselves, out of themselves and thrown towards the other. It is not surprising that the experience of married union is one of the images we use to speak of Heaven since the union between man and woman is one of the analogies that can bring us closest to what will take place between us, and between us and God. This is why the Apocalypse describes transformed and risen humanity as a bride who walks towards her husband.

^{*} «*Babette's gaestebud*». 1987. Danish film, directed by Gabriel Axel, on an Isak Dinesen's tale. The film can be a parable on grace. In a far village of Danish coast, two old sisters receive Babette, who has fled from revolutionary Paris. They ignore the fact that Babette has been considered a well-known chef in Paris. Having won a great amount of money in a lottery, she decides to prepare a thanksgiving diner for the inhabitants of the village with the best dishes she cooked in Paris. The diner, prepared with utmost care, will lead the neighbours to a deep happiness, which will wake the joy of life in the fellow-diners, just being the cause for human warmth to restore relationships of brother- and sisterhood. These relationships have been damaged by the closed life and puritan atmosphere dominating village's life.

If we walk towards the Horizon, as we have said before, in such a way that that Horizon becomes a surprise and a gift, to reach it cannot be anything else than a loving embrace with Him who has created us out of nothing and led us to his presence. Such words may perhaps seem obscure or unbelievable to some. But is not this the experience of love? He who feels loved, feels himself so profoundly enriched, so gifted, so grateful, that the only thing he can desire is to meet, embrace and be united with the person from whom this good comes. Rabindranath Tagore expresses it with a poet's clarity:

*«I don't come to you
just for a glass of water,
but for the fountain itself.
I don't come
looking for a guide just to the door,
but right into the house of the Lord:
I don't seek just a present of love,
but Love itself.»*

In the experience of faith, God is a constant Presence. God gives life with all that that offers, and his Presence accompanies and helps us on every occasion. And so Jesus is doctor, strength of the weak, freedom for the captive, avenger of the oppressed, companion on the road, master, Lord, friend, fiancé, bread for the journey, wine for the banquet, word, light, life... God is all these things and, in the last resort, is everything for the believer. An everything that does not cancel out anything but includes all things. As in Babette's Feast: nothing is superfluous, no detail, however small, is too much. When the joy of the sharing occurs, everything contributes to it and plays its part in the miracle, without anything or any person taking the centre of the stage other than the love which unites the fellow guests. Heaven must be like this: where God's embrace doesn't separate the embraced from the others nor the kiss from everything.

Because, if I speak of embracing God, one must understand that it is not an embrace which overwhelms one or leaves one anchored to God as if to a ship; it is more like "diving into" God, a plunge into an infinite space where one can walk without end, discover without end, admire without end. The embrace of a love that respects the distance from the other, that the nearer it is, the more the other experiences an inner spaciousness, height and depth. A distance and a union at the same time, in which there is a call to walk in the unlimited space of the relationship.

And so in God we find all things and all people, and in each one of them we find God. When one visits the exposition of a good painter, one ends by feeling his presence occupies all the space and, at the same time, discovers his imprint in each painting. In the same way, love of God does not cancel out any love but crowns every love with completion.

And in this embrace and union, as in every loving union, in our face are painted the characteristics of God's face. "They will see him face to face and his name will be written on their foreheads" as the Apocalypse puts it. God himself is reflected in us already and

will then be reflected with total clarity, as when we look at the golden light of a sunset reflected in everything. And just as the expressions of a son can be seen easily in the expressions of his father, so our smile will be like God's smile.

In this way will come to fruition "in a full measure, pressed down, shaken together" (Lk 6, 38) that original dream of God: that we should be in "his image and likeness".

I don't dare carry on speaking for I have already spoken enough nonsense. I only wish to recall, once more, that everything I say here about the "heart of Heaven", what will be its plenitude beyond our history, can already be experienced now, albeit in a limited and fragmentary manner. It is worth trying it for he who tries, succeeds.

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