The 'Last Things':
Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell

by Carol Luebering

My mother spoke of yearning to see my dad in heaven. A friend's response shattered her: "But you'll be so happy looking at God you won't even notice Sandy." Mother, of course, was speaking the hope of reunion to which grieving hearts cling. Her friend was echoing the Church's teaching that heaven's joy is focused on enjoying the "beatific vision," seeing God face-to-face. Who was right—Mother, her friend, or both of them?

We have, of course, no details of life in heaven. No tourists have come back with a scrapbook filled with snapshots. We do have some informed speculation. A branch of theology with a jaw-breaking name, *(eschatology,* a word derived from the Greek for "last") searches Scripture, tradition and our understanding of the world for clues to the "last things": death, judgment, heaven and hell. This *Update* will explore Catholic belief about these issues—what we hold and how we got there.

Death: The final certainty

Everything that lives on earth must die. That much is certain. From tender petunias to ancient sequoias, from single-celled creatures viewed under a microscope to the complex, intelligent species we call human beings, the astonishing variety of life that inhabits Planet Earth has a limited span. As far as we know, we are the only creatures who resist and deny that truth.

And resist we do! As a dying friend, a woman of deep faith, said to me: "It's just that you *know* what you have here, and it's very hard to leave."

The first thing we do not know is what death is. Previous generations had a different concept of the physical reality than we hold: When a person's breath no longer clouded a mirror, when a heart no longer beat within a chest, death had arrived. In our era, that can be just a "code blue"—a signal for hospital personnel to come running, a state which an individual may survive to enjoy many more years of good health. Today we talk about brain death and measure that organ's activity with high-tech machinery.

On a more philosophical level, Christians have for centuries spoken of the moment when the soul leaves the body—terminology that the human Jesus, like his Jewish contemporaries, would have found a bit strange. In Jewish thought, a human being was an indivisible whole. It was the Greeks who thought of us as a spiritual essence trapped in a body. When Christianity spread beyond Jerusalem to the Greek world, it adopted their idea.

Modern science, with its measurement of brain activity and its unraveling of the marvelous strands of DNA that make us the unique individuals we are, has swung us back along the arc of history, bringing us closer to Jesus' contemporaries' holistic understanding. We are indeed body-persons; our identity is closely linked to our physical structure.

History has also shaped our concepts of life after death. What we believe today about heaven and hell and judgment has developed slowly over many centuries. It is a tapestry woven not only of our understanding of physical reality, but also of varied concepts of God, of divine wrath and divine mercy.

The constants of belief

There are two primary constants in Christian belief. One is faith in Jesus' resurrection, the conviction that we, like him, will rise again. The other is our faith that Jesus will return to judge the world.

Even belief in the resurrection of the dead, so central to Christian faith, didn't suddenly spring into being on Easter morning. Before Jesus was born, it was developing slowly in Judaism; in Jesus' day it was still an idea new enough to argue about. Some Jews—the Pharisees—accepted it; others—the Sadducees—did not. The Gospels tell of the Sadducees' attempt to make the idea look ridiculous by asking Jesus whose wife a woman widowed seven times would be in the next life. But Jesus affirmed the resurrection, insisting that God is "God not of the dead but of the living" (see Mark 12:18-27).

No one saw Jesus leave the tomb; we have no hint of just what happened on Easter morning. The Gospels record just two things: (1) The tomb was found empty and (2) the people who had loved and followed Jesus saw him alive after his burial. Yet that scrappy testimony inspires a conviction about Jesus' resurrection and ours: It is bodily. Like the Lord, we will rise not as disembodied souls, but as whole persons.

We *will* rise—but when and how? Scripture gives a few clues to the *how.* The disciples experienced the risen Lord as physically present. He ate (Luke 24:29-30, 41-43). He invited Thomas to touch the wounds he suffered on Calvary (John 20:27). Yet he moved without regard for physical limits, suddenly appearing in locked rooms (John 20:19, 26). His body was not the same as it had been.

St. Paul, who never knew Jesus in his earthly life but ran smack into him on the road to Damascus, answered the *how* question this way: "[The body] is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15:44*).* The resurrection we anticipate, like Jesus' own, lies beyond the physical restraints of the world we know.

When was a question for many centuries. The first Christians thought that the dead simply slept, awaiting Jesus' return. Of course, they expected him to show up any day. As centuries rolled by without Jesus' return in glory, believers began to debate the fate of the dead in the meantime. Not until 1336 did Pope Benedict XII define as dogma the long-growing conviction that people faced an individual judgment and entered heaven, hell or purgatory immediately after death. Our Christian belief that our beloved dead are with God and therefore still close to us, within the reach of our prayers, reflects that doctrine.

It's important to remember that the folks who first shaped our ideas of heaven and hell—purgatory, too—had to think of them as *places* situated above the skies or beneath the world. Their world was the center around which the sun moved. Medieval theologians could not in their wildest dreams imagine anything like the far-flung universe we know, much less a reality beyond space or time.

While bodily resurrection would seem to require some kind of a place (a question we'll explore later), it's much more helpful to think of the "places" of the afterlife as the *Catholic Encyclopedia* defines them: primarily *states of being*. Two such states are already familiar to us: One is life as we now know it. The other we don't remember, but before birth we dwelled in underwater darkness, aware of little but our mother's heartbeat. In Christian belief, death is very like birth: beginning a wholly new way of being, and knowing at last the Person who has been carrying us all along.

Facing God's judgment

As Shakespeare's Hamlet put it, "Aye, therein lays the rub." It is the thought of judgment that strikes fear into the Christian soul. Who among us dares to stand face-to-face with God? Who among us dares to own the darkness that lurks within us? The very word *judgment* becomes, in our minds, condemnation.

That's not the dictionary definition of the word. Webster speaks of authoritative opinion, a formal court decision, discernment and comparison.

More importantly, the people who shaped our faith centuries ago, the Jewish people who were Jesus' own forebears, didn't think of condemnation when they spoke of judgment. They didn't see themselves as defendants in a *criminal* court. Rather, they saw themselves as plaintiffs in a *civil* action, seeking redress from God for their suffering.

Like their Jewish ancestors, Christians await vindication. Speaking of the signs that announce his imminent return on the last day, Jesus told his followers to "stand erect and raise your heads because your redemption is at hand" (Luke 21:28). We fear condemnation because we too easily focus on our own weaknesses and failures rather than on God's goodness. In truth, were the scales of justice truly balanced, we would surely stand condemned. Nothing we do, nothing we are comes within light-years of God's holiness. The bottom line is not that we must *earn* eternal life but, rather, that God has lovingly given it to us. "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us," Paul wrote (Romans 5:8). And Jesus prayed that his disciples and all future believers "may be with me where I am" (John 17:24).

St. Paul speaks of facing judgment with imagery that again recalls birth: "At present I know partially; then I shall know fully, *as I am fully known"* (1 Corinthians 13:12, emphasis added). We wear a lot of masks to keep from being known. Perhaps no one judges us more harshly than we judge ourselves. But every now and then someone catches us off guard by peeking behind our masks and loving us as we are—a surprise someone called the most magical: "God's finger on one's shoulder." Truly, no one knows us so well and yet loves us with such enduring passion as God does.

The Last Judgment

Centuries of Christian art reflect many changes in our understanding of Christ's triumphant return. That event was eagerly awaited by the first believers. Into the early Middle Ages, works of art suggest joy rather than terror. Typical is a carving on the tomb of a bishop buried in 608: The elect, wakening from death's sleep, lift their arms to acclaim the returning Lord. Some 500 years later, another detail appears: the separation of the damned, the scene Jesus describes in Matthew 25:31-46. Their misery becomes more dominant and more horribly detailed as the centuries roll by.

The reasons for the change are too complex to explore here, but it seems apparent that Christianity took a rather gloomy turn after its first millennium ended without Jesus' return on clouds of glory. The *Dies Irae,* a hymn describing the terrors of Judgment Day, became part of the funeral liturgy and remained until the post-Vatican II liturgical reform.

Modern Scripture scholarship warns against taking biblical descriptions of judgment and punishment too literally. Jesus used this imagery, says theologian Richard McBrien, "to dramatize the urgency of his proclamation of the Kingdom and the seriousness of our decisions for or against the Kingdom."

Today we are returning to the positive aspects of Christ's return as Judge. This is the hour when we should indeed "raise our heads." Then our troubled world will become a new creation—the "new heavens and new earth" of Revelation 21:1 in which our risen bodies will dwell. God's creation is too precious to be wasted; the Creator wants to save it all.

Heaven: A world made new

The material of that new creation's construction is beyond our knowing. Our bodies will not likely be all our molecules reconstructed. (Which molecules? Every cell in our bodies is replaced many times in a lifetime!) Neither is the physical construction of the new earth what really matters. What counts is its transformation into the vision dear to the prophets' hearts: a world without suffering and death.

The favorite image of biblical authors is a banquet, a gigantic party replete with rich foods and choice wines (see Isaiah 25:6). That image sheds some light on the argument between my mother and her friend about what faces we will see in heaven: our loved ones' or only God's. You can't enter fully into the spirit of a party if you ignore all the other guests. Indeed, when Jesus depicted the judgment scene that inspired later Christian artists, he spoke of attention to others: "I was hungry and you gave me food..." (Matthew 25:35).

Ever since God gave Moses commandments which held a people responsible to God for harming a neighbor, our relationship with God has been tied up with our relationships to other people. Popular writer Father Leonard Foley, O.F.M., once speculated that in heaven we will, like God, be able to love perfectly.

Jesus rose with the scars of his crucifixion still apparent on his body. We will rise as individuals with a history, people scarred by our sinfulness and that of others, but also as people who, like Jesus, bear the marks of sacrifices made in the name of love. St. Paul named three things that last, and insisted that the greatest is love (see 1 Corinthians 13:13). The love we give now will endure forever.

In this life, the best parties end. There comes a point when we cannot hold our eyes open another moment. In thinking of the life to come, it's hard for us to imagine that we wouldn't tire of anything that goes on forever.

But the address on the invitation to the heavenly banquet reads "beyond time." Perhaps the closest we have ever come are those moments when "time stood still," when we were caught up in love, so absorbed in something outside ourselves that we never heard the clock tick. Such moments are a foretaste of heaven.

Cincinnati Archbishop Daniel Pilarczyk puts it well in *'We Believe': Essentials of Catholic Faith:* "Recollect the finest moments this life offers: the love of family and friends spoken and shared, the few really generous and disinterested actions we have performed, the sense of accomplishment at finishing a long and difficult project..., all the moments that we wish could last forever. All that will be ours in eternity, affirmed and enhanced beyond our wildest imagination...."

Hell: The demands of justice

But what about punishment? We would be uneasy to find ourselves seated at the heavenly banquet beside Hitler or Ivan the Terrible. It's hard to see how even God's mercy could run that deep! What about God's justice? The best of us must admit that we deserve some punishment, a taste of purgatory. Our concept of justice includes punishment. Human beings like the idea of hell—perhaps better than God does.

Jesus insisted very firmly that God's justice is very different from human justice. It has no edge of vindictiveness. He constantly rebuked the folks who chided him for keeping company with sinners. See, for example, the call of Matthew (Matthew 9:9-13) or Jesus' meeting with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10).

That said, we have to leave room for human refusal. We become who we are by the myriad choices we make over a lifetime. Each decision turns us toward God and neighbor or away from them.

One day our life ends, and with it the ability to make further choices. We die who we have become over the course of a lifetime: loving or unloving.

We *can* reject God's mercy and love, God's invitation to share in divine life. It's probably more accurate to say that we damn ourselves than to say that God condemns us to hell.

A well-worn story from Korea illustrates this truth. In this tale heaven, like the prophet's image, is a huge dinner party, but the guests are given chopsticks six feet long. They cannot feed themselves; they can only put choice tidbits into one another's mouths. Hell is just the same, but the guests, too caught up in selfishness, refuse to feed one another and forever wail their hunger.

"There is nothing to prevent a Christian's hoping (not knowing) that in practice the final fate of every human being...by the power of God's grace, which dwarfs and also redeems all evil, will be such that hell will not in the end exist," wrote the great theologian of our age, Karl Rahner. "Christians may have this hope (first for others and therefore also for themselves)" but only if they take the possibility of eternal damnation seriously. To do less, adds theologian George Vass "would not do justice to the seriousness of life, to the importance of moral decisions and the weight of the individual's responsibility."

Purgatory: Between heaven and hell

And what about the rest of us, whose lives are a mix of selfishness and generous love? We sin-plagued individuals cannot face God without shame. Catholic belief includes a concept of purgatory—some means of purgation or purification.

It's a truism that drowning people see their whole lives unfolding before their eyes. A study of near-death experiences, the recollections of those code-blue survivors, reports just such an occurrence. They speak of being enveloped in the warmth and love of a "being of light," whom they identify in terms of their particular religious belief as Christ, God or an angel. This being presents them with a panoramic review of their whole life.

Add that evidence to our understanding that we're talking about states of being, about an experience that exists beyond space and time, and we can say that perhaps purgatory is just a moment of transition. As Rahner put it, it is "an element of the encounter with God; that is, the encounter of the unfinished person, still immature in his love, with the holy, infinite, loving God; an encounter which is profoundly humiliating, painful and therefore purifying."

Catholics pray for the dead and believe that their prayers can ease the process of purification. Certainly, prayer transcends time and space. The prayer we breathe today for a loved one powerfully places u with that person. Lifted beyond the reach of time, who is to say that it can't affect any moment in that person's history—even the long-ago moment of death when he or she came face-to-face with God?

A future in God's hands

In a pastoral letter Cardinal Joseph Bernardin once described prayer as "relaxing in the hand of God." In the long run, the "last things" are, like us, in God's loving hands. Why waste time and energy fretting over details no one can determine? We need only to trust St. Paul's assurance that "eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, what God has prepared for those who love him" (see 1 Corinthians 2:9). To quote Rahner again, "Let us for the present simply have a little patience with history as it runs its course, with ourselves, and with God."

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