

**St. George's Cathedral, Kingston Ontario
Sunday, March 3, 2019
1st Corinthians 15: 51-55 "The Light to Come"**

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"I hope with all my heart there will be painting in heaven" - Jean-Baptiste-Camille-Corot 1796-1875

I have a psychiatrist friend who used to counsel patients at the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre in Toronto, particularly those who had just received

a diagnosis of terminal illness. One day he visited just such a patient and asked. “How are you doing? Well,” said the man, “I’m about to discover one of the great mysteries of life.”

One of the great mysteries of life is our subject for this morning, the very same mystery described by St. Paul in our second lesson from 1st Corinthians: “Behold I tell you a Mystery.” What happens to us when we die? Is it all over, as our atheist friends insist? Or do we somehow, in some way survive the death of our earthly body, as we are promised throughout scripture? I decided for this morning to address this question through the lens of words and music, because I believe that the best way to think about what happens when we die IS through the imagination of artists. For two reasons: artists - composers, writers - make the case most compellingly, and artists are not afraid to channel their inner child when imagining. They are not afraid simply to disregard the questions of science, of the intellect, and the rigidity of unbelief.

On the front cover of your bulletin this morning is a painting by the 19th century French painter Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot. Corot loved Italy, especially for its light and spent much time there. This painting is called “Souvenir from Riva,” Riva being a small resort city on Lake Garda, and you can find the painting in the Taft Museum in Cincinnati. In reading about Corot one day I came across this quote of his: “I hope with all my heart there will be painting in heaven.” A delightful child-like assumption and hope, a hope that human beings have carried with them since they were painting on caves in the Dordogne in southwestern France. Or burying pharaohs in Egyptian tombs. Now the issue rages scientifically, with

myriads of near death experiences, NDE's as they're called, including the eloquent and persuasive neurosurgeon Eben Alexander in his book *Proof of Heaven*. I'm not sure we will ever really have a proof of Heaven until - in the words of the Christmas Bidding Prayer - we cross over to that other shore in a greater light. So what do we do in the meantime?

I cannot read these verses from Corinthians without hearing a great bass voice singing them, in the brilliant word painting that Handel created for Part Three of *Messiah*. The recitative begins softly:

“Behold I tell you a Mystery:
We shall not sleep, but we shall be changed, i
n a moment, in the Twinkling of an Eye,
at the last Trumpet.”

By the time we get to “at the last Trumpet,” we have an escalating crescendo of dramatic tension setting up the entry of the trumpet in the bass aria “The Trumpet shall sound, and the Dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall all be changed.” Can't you just hear it now? That aria is such a magnificent duet between bass and trumpet, one of the many triumphant moments in *Messiah*, shot through with conviction that our Redeemer liveth, that in Christ shall all be made alive, that death is swallowed up in victory.

Staying with music, we come to the 2nd, 3rd and 4th symphonies of Gustav Mahler. All three of these symphonies have visions of heaven, of a triumph over death and the pain and sorrow of this life. Mahler was Jewish, but converted to Catholicism. It's still a matter of great debate whether he did it for practical reasons, just so that he could conduct at the Vienna State Opera in anti-Semitic Vienna, or whether there was more to it. None other than

Leonard Bernstein, the great Mahler champion of the 20th century, said that Mahler was attracted to the Christian vision of heaven and it may have had something to do with his conversion. And certainly when you listen to these three symphonies, it's not hard to imagine that he was attracted to the idea of Christian life after death.

Many of you will know the 2nd Symphony, called the "Resurrection." The "Resurrection" Symphony has two unforgettable movements. The third movement "Urlicht" or "Primeval Light" (the light from the earliest age of our earth) is a song for contralto and orchestra using the text from a set of German folk poems known as "The Boy's Magic Horn."

"Humankind lies in greatest need, in greatest pain!" sings the alto.
"Much rather would I be in Heaven....
I am from God and would return to God!
Dear God will give me a little light, to light me to eternal, blissful life."

Naive child-like verses, but oh what Mahler makes of it. His setting of this poem is one of his most beautiful songs: tender, full of yearning, peaceful. One of the finest recordings ever made of the Urlicht is by our own Maureen Forrester, which she recorded in 1963 with the Vienna Symphony. You can Google it - treat yourself this afternoon.

The last movement of the Resurrection Symphony is a huge setting – a 15-minute hymn - for soprano, contralto, chorus and orchestra, based on a hymn text which Mahler heard at a funeral for a friend, to which he added some verses of his own. These are some of his own words:

“O believe:
You were not born in vain!
You have not lived in vain, nor suffered in vain!

All that has come into being must perish!
All that has perished must rise again!
Cease from trembling!
Prepare to live!

O Death, conqueror of all things,
Now you are conquered!
With wings I shall fly upwards
To that light which no mortal light has perceived.
I shall die so that I may live.

Rise again, yes you will rise again,
My heart, in the twinkling of an eye!
What you have conquered
Will bear you to God.

Mahler's music setting of his own text begins as a passionate soprano and contralto duet about the vanquishing of pain and death, and then the chorus returns in triumph to sing “I shall die so that I may live. Rise again, yes you will rise again” and the symphony ends in a din of fanfares and pealing bells. They say there are no atheists in fox holes. I wonder how many atheists don't have their unbelief shaken at least a bit by hearing this music with a huge cast of singers and players in a concert hall?

The huge 3rd symphony - Mahler's longest clocking in at 1 hour 20 minutes - has a 5th movement with boys chorus and womens' chorus joining the orchestra in a dialogue between angels, a St. Peter who castigates himself for his sinfulness, and Jesus himself, a very Christian view of “Heavenly joy that comes eventually, a Heavenly joy that has no end.” Again massive

forces, overwhelming sound, that might even make Cecil B. DeMille blush.

And then the finale of the 4th Symphony, with its delightful song for soprano and orchestra, a child's vision of Heaven, again borrowing images and text from "The Boy's Magic Horn" collection. A Heavenly vision of earthly joys - Saint Luke slaughtering an ox, Wine is free and flowing, angels bake the bread, the heavenly vegetable patch is full of good asparagus and string beans, good apples, good pears, good grapes, the fishes come swimming with joy into St. Peter's net. It's a sensual, earthy, delightful, sunny picture of heaven. (If you've never been much of a Mahler fan and want to try again, this 4th symphony might be the place to begin - angst free Mahler).

You might think this a bit of a stretch but that last movement of Mahler's 4th Symphony reminds me of *The Last Battle*, the last book in C S Lewis's *Narnia Chronicles*. Throughout the *Narnia Chronicles* the vision of heaven is Aslan's Country always glimpsed from a distance. But the fullest description comes in *The Last Battle*: Peter, Lucie and Edmund find themselves in a huge land of light and joy. It is a place of youth (as Jill puts it, the Professor and Aunt Polly aren't "much older than we are here"), it's a place of health (Edmund's knee ceases to be sore and the Professor suddenly feels unstiffened), a place of abundance (they have crowns on their heads and are in glittering clothes), and a place of freedom (it feels like "the country where everything is allowed"). And it is a place of beauty and of bounty: The children see groves of trees, thick with leaves, and under every leaf there peeps out the rich colors of fruits "such as no one has seen in our world," fruits compared with which "the freshest grapefruit you've ever

eaten was dull, and the juiciest orange was dry.”

Emily Dickinson, in her poem, “I went to heaven,” imagines heaven as a small town

Lit with a ruby,
Lathed with down.
Stiller than the fields
At the full dew,
Beautiful as pictures
No man drew

Robert Frost, in his poem, “Lost in Heaven,” asks the question:

“Where, where in Heaven am I? But don’t tell me!
O opening clouds, by opening on me wide.
Let’s let my heavenly lostness overwhelm me.”

For Frost proof of heaven is not the issue. He is content to feel overwhelmed by looking up into the vastness of space in all its glittering glory.

What to make of all these artistic visions of heaven? To me they are a collective witness of great imaginations. The imaginative approach to the question - what happens when we die? Yes it IS a mystery, but a mystery contains with it all possibilities, not just one. As Christians we are given a promise, a promise that we are asked to take on faith. Many of us want to believe the promise, even where we have no real, certifiable proof. But we also need to be bolstered occasionally, because the sceptics, the naysayers, the atheists, the arrogant know-it-all secularists wear us down.

Artists do an end run around these ankle-biting naysayers. Artists, in their imaginations, simply assume it. They make it up, compellingly, beautifully, movingly. Gustav Mahler borrowed them from children's poems and then set them to blindingly magnificent music. We know from a servant of George Frederick Handel's that Handel worked feverishly at *Messiah*. Like a man possessed, Hardly eating or sleeping. At times so frenzied he seemed to be going mad, writing until his fingers could no longer hold the pen. When he finished the Hallelujah Chorus he sobbed: "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God himself." Easy to say Handel was delirious, hadn't eaten or slept and was out of his mind. But - what does his Music tell us? About what he saw? I ask you?

At the centre of much of the great literature and music about heaven is the image of Light. For Mahler it was a vision of Primaeval Light, ancient light, a light to which we will return. John Donne uses that image as well imagining in his famous prayer about where we go when we die: "And into that gate they shall enter, and in that house they shall dwell, where there shall be no cloud nor sun, no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light." Such a beautiful image, of an equal light. But Donne goes one further. He also imagines there will be "no noise nor silence, but one equal music." And that brings me to my final reference this morning. A more recent one, from just two years ago.

Mark Helprin - the American novelist - in his most recent novel called *Paris in the Present Tense*, two old Jewish men are talking. One is a wealthy industrialist. The other a classical cellist. Both are facing death. The one says to the other: "If there's a God, and I do believe so even if He's become

inscrutable to me, music is the finest and possibly the last way of reaching Him... Music shows you there is something sublime... When I was younger I used to believe that if there's an afterlife it would be filled with luminous colour and and gentle light. Now I think that it would be like music. When music, which seems more real than life itself vanishes, (when music vanishes) where does it go? Maybe when we vanish we'll go there too."

That's the most compelling vision for me as we meet here this morning. Going to that place where music vanishes. We will never solve the mystery until we leave this world. But if we can't solve it, we can imagine it, or at least join that cloud of artistic witnesses who bring us the closest to knowing, to experiencing its glory, giving us the courage of our faith to believe in the promise that somehow, in some dimension, we will rise again. Amen.

Paradise Lost by John Milton

The fallen angels wallow in darkness, and God watches from "the pure empyrean" while "ambrosial fragrance filled / All heaven". Milton imagines it as a place of divine choral music, "blest voices, uttering joy". The angels twang their harps "with preamble sweet / Of charming symphony".