

Heaven

Acts 7:55-60; John 14:1-14

Amongst the books I read on holiday last week was Stephen King's, *The Life of Chuck*. You may have seen the film starring Tom Hiddleston and some extraordinary dance moves.

The plot follows the formative moments in the life of Charles "Chuck" Krantz, chronicled in reverse order, from his death to his childhood. Along the way, backwards, we go from the end to the beginning, all the people he met along the way, in depth or only fleetingly, like dancing with a girl to the music of a busker on a city street, to a vision he had of himself as an older man, awaiting death from a brain tumour, lying in a hospital bed. The, "*thought of a whole world inside the fragile bowl of his skull.*"^q

There's an African proverb that says, '*When an old man dies, a library burns down*', which captures something of the line in the American poet Walt Whitman's, '*Song of Myself*', where he writes, "*I am huge, I contain multitudes.*"

A clergy friend some time ago drew my attention to a book I didn't know. Written by the American author Mitch Albom, it has the beguiling title, '*The Five People You Meet in Heaven*'. One critic has described it as, "*Simply told, sentimental and profoundly true, ...like Charles Dickens's 'A Christmas Carol', it reminds us of what really matters here on earth, of what our lives are given to us for...*"

Without telling you too much, it's a deeply moving story about an old man called Eddie who dies and goes to heaven. When he's there, he discovers that everybody in heaven has to meet five people, and these five people, whom you may have known well or hardly at all, explain to you something about your life that you didn't know and teach you one thing so that you can rest in

peace. One of the people Eddie has to meet says to him, *'Each of us was in your life for a reason. You may not have known the reason at the time, and that is what Heaven is for. For understanding your life on earth.'*ⁱⁱ

I still find that an incredible idea. A helpful way not only about how to look at heaven, but also how to look more closely at what we do with our time on earth. Not only to look at what we do, but to listen to what is going on around us. One of the characters in the book says, *"People think of heaven as a paradise garden, a place where they can float on clouds and laze in rivers and mountains. But scenery without solace is meaningless. This is the greatest gifts that God can give you: To understand what happened in your life. To have it explained. It is the peace you have been searching for."*ⁱⁱⁱ

Another character says: *"...there are no random acts...we are all connected...you can no more separate one life from another than you can separate the breeze from the wind...the human spirit knows, deep down, that all lives intersect..."*^{iv} Even if we do not know the names of the people who brush against our lives, *"Strangers...are just family you have yet to come to know."*^v Another character tells the hero of the book, *"That's what heaven is. You get to make sense of your yesterdays."*^{vi} Finally, having met his five people in heaven, Eddie returns to the place where he in turn will, *'...share his part of the secret of heaven: That each affects the other and the other affects the next, and the world is full of stories, but the stories are all one.'*^{vii}

Whether it is this incredible book, or that incredible Christmas favourite film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, where the main character learns what the world would have been had he never lived, this idea of how heaven and earth weave together is important.

Jesus, in John's Gospel, in the upper room, speaks to His closest friends at the Last Supper, around the Lord's Table. They've shared the bread and wine of what we call communion. Jesus teaches

them about how they should live without His physical presence in their midst. He talks about heaven as being like His Father's house. There is no mention of pearly gates, or the kind of wallpaper God has chosen, or choirs of angels strumming harps, or what the temperature is like. It is simply, *'In My Father's house there are many rooms.'* God is there, and, according to the martyr deacon Stephen in the Book of Acts, Jesus is there too. In the moments before he was murdered, Stephen prays for his persecutors, and looking heavenward has a vision of God in glory, and Jesus standing beside Him. From earth we see not the dimensions but the landlords: a loving God, and a befriending Saviour. Stephen believed that in the face of death, God's love would not be destroyed. It would be poured out from heaven onto earth with unhindered generosity. It is a reminder to all of us that God loves us, and there is nothing we can do about it. We may give every reason for God to give up on us, but He still loves us anyway. The irony of Stephen's martyrdom is that though his persecutors broke his body, from the shattered breaking, the shards of heaven's love continued to pierce the world; the sparks of heaven's mercy continued to illuminate the world. Through these fragmented pieces of heaven, God reached out further into the mosaic creation of our world.

And that's it about heaven. Perhaps it's all we need to know about heaven: that there is plenty of room; and that God is there with Jesus, waiting to welcome us home.

I read the passage from John's Gospel a lot at funerals, for good reason. There are so many people with troubled hearts, troubled by the fact that the gift of mortal life does not last. What is the answer to that trouble? Many could be suggested by the world, but Jesus only has one, *'Believe in God, believe also in Me.'* In heaven, in earth, in life, in death, in the life beyond death, 'God is what you hang your heart upon.'^{viii} If our hearts are not hanging on God, not hanging on Jesus, then they will be troubled.

Jesus talked about life after death in this many-roomed house. There is a roominess to God and God's relationship with us, not just in the space, but in the time God has for us on earth and in heaven. God's roominess is God's eternity. When Mitch Albom's character Eddie meets his five people in heaven, they all take him to places where they had been happy. Eddie goes from room to room, from episode to episode, from person to person, learning about what his life had been, and the difference that those times, places and people had made to him, and the difference in the end that his life made to other people. Heaven may be the place where the questions are answered. Heaven may be the place where what has felt like our incompleteness is made complete; heaven may be the place where our emptiness is filled, and our randomness is placed in order. We pray so often, '*Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, in earth as it is in heaven.*' Let's not wait till we're dead to start trying to make sense of what our life was about. Even if only in part, let's start putting it into practice now. Let's bring our little part of heaven to bear on the little part of earth that has been given to us today.

We need that lived-out heaven on earth now. In the streets of Golders Green in the wake of antisemitic violence. In the shattered streets of Gaza and Beirut, of Iranian and Sudanese cities and towns. In the Scottish Parliamentary elections of this week where promises are made by everyone, yet the reality of how they will be achieved let alone sustained seems cloudy. In the debates of the forthcoming General Assembly of the Church of Scotland where uncertainty about the future, and a fear to live up to our broad-church tradition is hampered by too few hands on the leverage of legislation. We do not ache for a heavenly truth in a far-away galaxy. We yearn for the lived-out promises of Jesus and His teaching and His mercy and His love in our world, here and now!

The admission of a new communicant, one who has been baptised in this Church, and one who has grown up through Sunday School and Christmas nativities and Easter and Harvest events, is a wonderful thing. We are reminded in the promises made today of promises we and others have made. We may walk the streets of earth, but our hearts are fixed on the hopefulness of heaven. Inspired by God's Spirit, not broken down yet, nor giving up, we may go about not reviving the past, but creating a present that tiptoes towards the future. Where a house of many rooms, with a roof not leaking, with God the Father and Christ the Son ready to welcome us home: there is a vision of heaven we might work towards today.

There is a vision of heaven we might begin to make real in our world, and in our lives, right here, and right now!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Stephen King, *The Life of Chuck*, p81

ⁱⁱ Mark Oakley, *By Way of the Heart*, p137

ⁱⁱⁱ Mitch Albom, *The Five People You Meet In Heaven*, p37

^{iv} *ibid* p50

^v *ibid* p51

^{vi} *ibid* p96

^{vii} *ibid* p20

^{viii} Cynthia A Jarvis, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 2*, p467