



**A sermon preached on Sunday 16th December 2012 (Advent 3)
by the Right Reverend Ronnie Bowlby**

I have been disposing of some books recently, a part of 'letting go' as I get older. I came across a 6d pamphlet [old currency] entitled 'What happens when I die?', written by the Vicar of All Saints, Margaret Street in London, Dom Bernard Clements. It contains two talks which he broadcast in the early days of the BBC, at the beginning of the outbreak of the second world war.

Huge numbers of people were facing the possibility of sudden death, not just those in uniform but civilians too, caught up in air raids and the ravages of modern warfare. Was there really a life after death, people wondered; and if so, what would it be like? The talks presented a fairly traditional view, rooted in parts of Scripture, but drawing in later developments. "Yes", said the author, "there is some kind of life after death, which may be either pleasant, Heaven, or unpleasant, Hell". There will be for a believer, the possibility, of a closer union with God, and at the heart of that is the vision of Jesus. How this happens, and indeed whether it does, will depend in part on what sort of person you have been in this life.

Those of you who like visiting old churches will know that many of the medieval ones had so-called doom paintings on the wall, to remind illiterate worshippers of what lay ahead.

Numerous texts from the New Testament support this view, which gradually supplanted the original Old Testament view that we would all go to Sheol, the place of the departed, from which there was seldom any escape. Read the psalms for that. In Our Lord's time things had changed, so that by then there were the Pharisees, who did believe in some kind of life after death, and the Sadducees, who did not.

Jesus endorsed the former in various ways, we learn, notably in the parable of the sheep and goats recorded in Matthew, 25. Here is a vivid picture of the Son of Man, God, coming in glory to judge the nations. Those who had failed to show compassion or practical help to the needy will, and I quote, "go away into eternal punishment", the righteous, however, "will go away into eternal life". No wonder people feared death. It sounds clear enough, but there is also quite a lot in the New Testament about what the hymn writer and priest F.W.Faber called the wideness of God's mercy. Our failure to love can be forgiven. Paul wrestles with this dilemma. God, he says, does not want us all permanently shut out of God's presence.

Romans 8 v38-39 "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor ruler, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers. nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord".

How this might happen , and indeed whether it will, is a mystery beyond present understanding. All one can say is that there is certainly hope that God's love will prevail over human sin and wickedness in the end. But how and when is a matter of pure speculation, since no one except the risen Christ has come back to tell us of a life beyond the grave. "In my Father's house are many resting places".

Is this a reasonable belief to hold now, when we know so much more about the sheer size and complexity of our universe than was known even in 1939 ?. A cynical friend of mine began a sermon by saying that "The House of Lords is the only evidence for survival after death". [Alistair Haggart]. Lurking in many people's minds then was this picture of a kind of three-decker universe, this being reinforced by some of our hymns in particular, with their language of heaven 'up there' and hell 'down below'. I have said this before, I know, but it is vital to sing old hymns, and indeed to read your Bible, with a sharp sense that reality may not correspond to some of what you are saying. At best, there are

hints of the kind the poets use constantly; but not accurate answers to the kind of question with which I started, “What happens when I die”?

One modern speculation which I have found helpful is that of ‘parallel’ universes, used for instance by Philip Pullman in his books. Here we enter worlds with quite different dimensions which exist alongside our world, but are invisible to us. When you and I die, perhaps what may happen is that our fundamental identity or personality slips through into another kind of universe utterly different from this one in most respects. Given what we know about the amazing things that seem to happen in space, and at the micro level of split atoms and all the rest, it is not a wholly irrational belief.

But at present this is speculation and not fact.

Somehow at the heart of this world or universe beyond ours will be the God who creates and sustains it all, and whom Christians worship and try to understand a little through the person of Christ. Others including other faiths, will perhaps enter this new dimension in other ways.

If you believe something along these lines, it does give a sense of hope and purpose to this life which our world so desperately needs. This is the long perspective. For back in the twelfth century, it was said of a monastic abbot that he was ‘not loth to die because he had enjoyed to live. He departed willingly, because he knew that better things were in store after his passing’.

That is the hope. It is not ‘pie in the sky’; it is not fact; it is rational belief, and it is noticeable that all the Creed says is that we affirm our belief ‘in the life everlasting’, whatever that may turn out to be.

Written on my sister-in-law’s tomb stone are her name, and the dates of her life, and just two more words, Jesus Lives. In Jesus, so do we now, here and hereafter. That is the Advent hope, leading to the Nativity or Christmas event which we are about to celebrate once more.