



ST GEORGE'S LECTURES

10 - Is There a Destiny Beyond Death?

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Is There a Destiny Beyond Death?

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Let us start with the cosmic scene before focusing on humanity. When astronomers peer into space they are also looking back in time. Because light travels with a finite velocity, when we look at some distant galaxy we are seeing it as it was millions of years ago or perhaps even billions of years ago. We can look back into the history of the universe in that sort of way and with the help of theorists, who can make sense of these observations and put them together into a coherent story, we can tell the fascinating and long past history of the world in which we live.

I'm sure you all know that the universe as we observe it today originated in the fiery singularity of the big bang. Astronomers are getting pretty precise about these things and they now date it as 13.7 billion years ago. It all started extremely simple. The very early universe is just an expanding ball of energy – about the simplest physical system you could possibly have. And that world that started so simple has of course become very rich and complex, with you and me, actually, the most complex consequences of its nearly fourteen billion year evolving history of which we are anyway aware. The human brain is far and away the most complex system we have ever encountered in our explorations of the world. The facts in themselves are pretty congenial, I suppose, to taking a religious view of cosmic history, of thinking of the world as some sort of creation. The fact that it started simple and became rich and complex does suggest there might be more going on in what's been happening than simply can be described by science alone; that there is a meaning and indeed a purpose behind cosmic history.

But not only can we peer into the past, but with less certainty and certainly less detail we can also peer into the future. And cosmologists can tell us not only how they believe the universe began but also how it will end. And when they start telling that story it becomes a rather darker account, because one way or the other it seems pretty clear that the universe is going to end badly. It may be fruitful today but it won't be forever. You see, if you think about the history of the universe on the grandest possible scale, it's been, and will continue to be, a sort of gigantic tug of war between two opposing principles. One is the fiery explosion of the big bang thrusting matter apart, causing the universe to expand and the galaxies to move apart from each other. The other is the continual tug of gravity pulling things together. And those two are very evenly matched in our world. Currently cosmologists think that expansion is going to win, but if we are cautious people we should consider both scenarios.

So what happens if expansion does win? Well, then the universe keeps on expanding, it keeps on getting colder, it keeps on getting more and more dilute and in the end it ends with a very long drawn out dying whimper. Not a very attractive proposition, you might think. Well, we won't be around to see it. It will take many tens of billions of years before that happens, but it will happen one day for sure, if expansion wins.



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So is it a brighter prospect if gravity wins? Well, I'm afraid it's not. If gravity wins the present expansion will one day be halted and reversed. What began with the big bang will end in the big crunch, as matter falls back into a cosmic melting pot. One way or the other – freeze or fry – the universe is undoubtedly condemned to futility and it is as certain as can be that carbon-based life – any form of carbon-based life anywhere in the universe – will not go on forever. It may go on for quite a long time, but it certainly won't go on forever.

And that perhaps presents a bit more of a challenge to a theological interpretation of the universe as a creation. I mean, what's the Creator up to if in the end everything is condemned to futility? I have a friend who is a very distinguished American theoretical physicist whose name is Steven Weinberg. He's also an immensely staunch atheist, and in one of his books he says: "The more I understand the universe the more it seems pointless to me." What does it amount to if it's going to peter out one way or the other? And I think that from Steve's horizontal atheist perspective, with science the only story that he feels prepared to tell, I can entirely understand why he reaches that conclusion.

But I believe, of course, that there is another story, what you might call a vertical story, a story of God's faithfulness, which is also to be told, and that when you put those two stories together the prospects change in their character. That's why I want to think together with you this evening about how we might take all those scientific prognostications absolutely seriously, as I'm sure we ought to do, but still see whether we can theologically get beyond them and reach a more satisfying and hopeful conclusion. You see, it seems to me that the knowledge of the universe's death on a time scale of many tens of billions of years doesn't really fundamentally pose any more severe problems for theology than the even more certain knowledge of our own deaths, on a time scale of tens of years. Human death and cosmic death seem to me to pose the same question: what is the purpose and ultimate point of creation?

Human death, you remember, was something Jesus discussed with the Sadducees. You remember the Sadducees were a very conservative, very powerful, rather aristocratic group of Jewish people in Jesus's time. They ran the worship of the Temple, and they had a very delicate balancing act trying to keep on the right side of the Roman occupying power and the right side of their co-religionists. They were very conservative in their judgments about theological matters and they believed that only the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, the so-called books of Moses, Genesis to Deuteronomy, were authoritative scripture. As for the rest of the writings, they thought you could take it or leave it. And when they read those first five books they felt they did not find in them any grounds for believing that there is a human destiny beyond death, and so they didn't believe in that. So they came to have an argument with Jesus; and they did so in a very characteristically Jewish way. They came with a highly ingenious story, and you remember the story is that there is this woman, she marries somebody, unfortunately the chap dies without them having any children, and then it's a Jewish responsibility that his next brother should marry the widow in the hope of raising children in memory of his brother's posterity. But unfortunately that brother dies, so the next brother steps in and marries the widow, but he dies, and eventually she runs through the whole seven brothers. Seven husbands, no children, and then eventually the woman dies. And now comes the punch line of the story. The Sadducees say: and if there is a life in the world to come, whose wife will she then be? In other words, how will all the tangled, complicated things of this world get sorted out in the life to come? It doesn't make sense, they say.



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Jesus deals with them in the way he often does with enquirers. He doesn't just stay with the superficial story that's been presented to him, but he cuts through that to the heart of the matter, in a way that I have to say I very much admire. Instead of talking about what happens to the woman and her husbands, he takes the enquirers back to Exodus, which of course was a book they did take seriously and he reminds them that in Exodus God speaks to Moses from the burning bush. God says to Moses: "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob" and Jesus comments "The God not of the dead but of the living". And you see the point that's being made, and to me it's a very convincing point. If there is a God who is faithful, if there is a God to whom the patriarchs mattered once (and for sure they did), then they will matter to that faithful God forever. They will not just be thrown aside at their death as if they were broken pots, cast on the rubbish heap of the universe. If you and I matter to God once, and we do, we shall matter to God forever. In other words, the hope of a destiny beyond death doesn't lie in anything that is purely human; it lies in the everlasting faithfulness of God. And if that's the case, and if there is such a God, and I believe there is, then it is indeed a sure and certain hope. In fact, it seems to me that all creation will matter to God. The universe is not just there to be the backdrop of the human drama taking place after an overture lasting fourteen billion years. The whole of creation must matter to God, so just as you and I will have a destiny beyond our death, so the universe itself will also have a destiny beyond its death.

What I want to try to do this evening is think together a little bit about that fundamental basis of trust in divine faithfulness. Science by itself will never be able to get beyond the brick wall of mortality, but if we believe there is a faithful God, then our hope will leap over that wall. But what I particularly want to discuss this evening with you is: Can we make sense of that hope of a destiny beyond death? The basis for it is God's faithfulness, but it also has to be something that is credible, that makes sense. Can we do that? That's the problem. And as you start to wrestle with that sort of problem you very soon become aware that you are trying to do again a balancing act between two opposing requirements. One requirement is a requirement of continuity and the other requirement is a requirement of discontinuity. You see, it has really to be Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who live again in the Kingdom of God, not just new characters who've been given the old names for old times' sake. It really has to be the patriarchs who live again. That's the continuity requirement.

But it's no good making Abraham, Isaac and Jacob live again simply in order to die again. It isn't enough to resuscitate them, just restore them to this sort of life. That's a foolish thing to do and not at all a ground of hope. So there has to be also discontinuity. The life of the world to come has to be different in its character from the life of this world. So we have this business of continuity / discontinuity and we have to try and see, thinking together, whether we can make mutual sense of those two requirements.

So let me kick off by saying a little bit about continuity. How would we know, how could God ensure, that it really is Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who are living again? What's the carrier of continuity between life in this world and life in the world to come? I suppose that the answer to that that Christian thinkers have given over the centuries has been: it is the human soul which is the carrier of continuity. But there's a problem about that, because quite often in Christian theological history people have thought about the soul in what you might call a Platonic way. They thought of the soul as being a sort of spiritual bit of us which is temporarily housed in the fleshly husk of the body and is then liberated from that at death, and which perhaps possesses a natural immortality of its own. In other words they had a dualist view of human nature, of a spiritual soul encased in a fleshly body.



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If you don't like that picture of human nature – and I have to confess I don't like it very much – you can follow Gilbert Ryle, a rather sarcastic Oxford philosopher, in saying it's the theory of human beings as “ghosts in machines”. I don't like that picture myself because I think it's become more and more difficult for us to believe in it today. What we know about the effect of drugs and brain damage on human personality indicates I think a much more intimate connection between our mental and spiritual experience and our bodily experience than that dualist picture can convey. Similarly, if we reflect upon the long history of the evolution of hominid life, there is a sort of continuity carrying us back to our hominid ancestors and from them back to earlier forms of life and so on, ultimately back to the inanimate, chemically rich, shallow waters of early earth in which we believe life probably originated. There is a sort of continuity there that doesn't seem to square with that dualist picture. So I don't think we are “ghosts in machines”, I don't think the soul is a detachable spiritual component. I think we are “package deals”, for I think that human beings are psychosomatic unities. And that wouldn't have surprised the writers of the Bible because, by and large, that's what they thought too. In a very famous phrase that somebody once uttered, Hebrew people thought of human beings not as incarnated souls, but as animated bodies – as package deals.

But now the problem is this – if we take that point of view of human nature, have we lost altogether the idea of the soul? I think that theologically that would be a fairly disastrous thing to have done. So can we, nevertheless, taking this unified view of human nature, retain some useful concept of the soul? That's my first problem.

Well, I think the soul is “the real me”. That's not very helpful, you might say, you'll have to spell that out a bit. Actually, what the real me is is quite hard to figure out, not only beyond death, but even in this life. I stand before you here this evening, an aging, balding academic. What makes me the same person as the little boy with the shock of black hair in the school photograph of sixty years ago? At first sight it's tempting to say it's material continuity that makes me the same, but that's an illusion actually. Because the matter that makes up our bodies, the atoms of which we are composed, are changing all the time through wear and tear, eating and drinking. We don't have many atoms in our bodies that were there even a few years ago, and I have virtually no atoms in common with that schoolboy. So it's not gross material continuity that makes me the same person as that young lad.

So what is it then? I think it's the almost infinitely complex information-bearing pattern in which that matter is organized. A lot of that pattern is sitting inside my skull, but not entirely. As my character forms, as my memories accumulate and so on, the pattern of all that rich complexity is the thing that carries the continuity. It's a dynamic pattern, though no doubt it also has fixed elements. I think there is some sort of signature part of that pattern that says “John Polkinghorne” as opposed to anybody else. My genome for example would be a part of that fixed pattern, but only a part. I'm not for a moment a genetic reductionist. This notion of an information-bearing pattern corresponds to what is a very interesting development that seems currently to be taking place in scientific thinking about the world in which we live. Science has mostly proceeded over the last 350 years by splitting things up into bits and pieces. “Divide and rule” has been the motto of scientists. I was an elementary particle physicist, and from my purely professional point of view you are all just rather complex collections of quarks and gluons (which are the particles that make the quarks stick together), and electrons. But I think there might be more to say about you than that. We have been very successful scientifically by splitting things up into bits and pieces, mainly because it's much easier to think about bits and pieces than about complex totalities. But we're just beginning to be able to study, in



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quite a small way, the behaviour of rather more complex systems, and when people do that, they find very surprising results and, I think, both mystifying and exciting things.

This subject is sometimes called complexity theory, but at the moment it's really not a science, for it's more like natural history. People study computerised models of moderately complex systems – nothing like as complex as a single living cell, let alone a human being, but still moderately complex systems. They study these models and run the models many many times on their computers and they find that when they do that these systems exhibit very astonishing unexpected properties, possessed by their totality, of a kind that you would never have guessed from the components that make them up. I want to just illustrate that point by giving you an example of one such system. There's someone called Stuart Kauffman who is a leading person in this field. He wrote a book called *At Home in the Universe*, which, if you are really interested in reading the detail of these things, would be a good book to read. Kauffman studied a logical model which runs on his computer. If you like logical learned language it's a Boolean net of connectivity 2 – but if you don't terribly like that language I'll describe it to you in physical terms – a sort of hardware realization of it.

Suppose you had an enormous array of electric light bulbs. Each of these electric light bulbs can be in one of two states – it's either on or it's off. And the system develops in steps. Each bulb in the array is correlated with two other bulbs somewhere else in the array. Whether they are on or off now will determine in a quite simple and specified way (that I don't really want to go into the details of) whether that bulb with which they are correlated will be on or off at the next step of the system's development. So you have this system correlated in that kind of way, developing in steps from some sort of initial random configuration. Some of the bulbs are on, some of the bulbs are off. You just, so to speak, turn the handle and let the system develop – and watch what happens.

Now I don't know whether you can guess what will happen. I would guess that if you started off in a random fashion, it would all just continue to behave haphazardly, twinkling away rather uninterestingly forever. But it turns out that that doesn't happen. Rather it turns out that the system very, very soon spontaneously generates very large-scale order in its behaviour. It doesn't behave at all haphazardly; it has a very ordered and intriguing dynamical behaviour. If you had 10,000 light bulbs in the array there would be 2^{10000} which is about 10^{3000} (which is a 1 followed by 3000 zeros and you don't have to be a great mathematician to know that's a very very very big number) different states of illumination of the system that were possible. Yet if you start that system off in the way I have described, very soon it will settle down to cycling through just 100 different states of illumination. 10^{3000} has been somehow mysteriously focused down to 10^2 . It's an absolutely astonishing phenomenon! So what's happening? Well, we don't know what's happening. Actually, at the moment, we just know these things happen, but do not understand why they do so.

Yet there clearly is a deep theory behind it, though at the moment that theory is not known. I think it's going to be characteristic of the science of the twenty-first century that people are going to pursue these matters of complex behaviour, and they are going to find that deep theory that underlies it and which produces these amazing spontaneous generations of order.

What will that theory look like? Obviously I don't know the details, but I think it will have two characteristics. First of all, it will be framed in terms of totalities rather than in terms of bits and pieces. It will be a holistic theory, as people say. And secondly, its fundamental category will be information, rather than energy. Again I don't quite know how to



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define this properly, but by information I mean something like the specification of dynamic, patterned behaviour. And I'm willing to bet – though I shan't be here to collect the winnings – that by the end of the twenty-first century information, in this sense that I'm trying to grope towards a definition of, will be as fundamental a category in our thinking about the behaviour of the physical world as energy undoubtedly has been. I think we shall have these two complementary levels of approach. There is exchange of energy between bits and pieces – that is certainly part of the story, particle physicists aren't going to be out of work – they've got things to discover and to do, but our understanding will be richer by adding the level of holistic information-generating, information-bearing behaviour. So if the soul, in some extraordinarily vast and generalized sense, is the information-bearing pattern of the body, that would fit very neatly into these scientific developments that I believe are just beginning to take place.

Suppose you buy my idea that that's what the human soul is. What happens to the human soul at death? When I die, my body decays and the pattern carried by my body will decay with it. So there is no natural expectation of a destiny beyond death. There is no *natural* immortality possessed by the human soul. But remember we haven't simply to tell the horizontal story of science – we have to tell also the vertical story of God's faithfulness. And it seems to me a perfectly credible hope, and one that I certainly embrace, that God will remember the pattern that was me, will hold that unique pattern in the divine memory and eventually will reconstitute that pattern in some great final act of resurrection. Final resurrection is necessary because, though there is this patterned, "soulish" aspect to human beings, I don't think you are really a human being unless you are also embodied in some way. We are not apprentice angels. We are embodied beings. We are mixtures of energy and information in the sense in which I have been talking. So we do have a destiny beyond death but, again as I actually started off by saying at the beginning, the hope for that doesn't rest in anything science on its own can tell us, for it rests fundamentally on the faithfulness of God. In terms of this picture of the soul I think we can make sense of the continuity requirement, of specifying that it is Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who will indeed be living again in the Kingdom of God.

But of course you have also got to have the discontinuity. The Christian hope has never been a sort of spiritualist survival. It has acknowledged that death is real, but not ultimate reality – only God is ultimate. Death followed by resurrection, that's the Christian picture I'm trying to convey. And resurrection is not resuscitation – it's re-embodiment, but it's not re-embodiment in the flesh and blood of this world. Hence the need for discontinuity.

If you read the fifteenth chapter of the first Epistle to the Corinthians, through all that chapter Paul is wrestling exactly with these problems of continuity and discontinuity. Paul knows, and says absolutely straight out, "flesh and blood will not inherit the kingdom of Heaven, nor will the corruptible put on incorruption". And that's perfectly right. So there has to be some discontinuity. And it seems to me again that it is a perfectly reasonable hope to entertain that God is capable of producing a new form of matter which will not be the flesh and blood of this world, and so will not be of a kind that leads inevitably to transience and death. It seems to me a coherent belief that God who is the creator of all can bring into being a world described at the end of Revelation, for example, as one in which "death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away".

But if that's right, and if God can do that, there is a very urgent question that immediately presses upon us. It is this: "If God can do that, can bring into being a new creation which doesn't have pain and death and suffering in it, why did God bother with this old creation? Why didn't God straight away do that wonderful act? Why this world, which is full of pain and death and suffering and tears and crying and so on? It's a very, very serious question.



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So while we may believe that God can bring into being a new world with new characteristics in it, we have to explain why God didn't do it right away. I think the clue to that lies in recognizing that God's creative purposes are intrinsically a two-step purpose. This is a very important insight and a great deal of twentieth century theological thinking from all sorts of different people and from all sorts of different angles, has sought to recognize that God's initial act of creation is what the theologians call a "kenotic" act. God brings into being a world that is not God's puppet theatre, not a world in which God makes everything happen. God who is the God of love, brings into being a world that is given a due degree of independence, to be itself and indeed to make itself. That's the theological way of thinking about an evolving world. The world started simple, it has become rich and complex, it has done so through evolving processes that brought to birth the very deep potential fruitfulness with which the universe had been endowed from the start. Yet that potentiality was, so to speak, explored and brought to birth by creatures making themselves through evolutionary processes.

And when you come to think about it, that's the sort of world which the God of love is going to bring into being. The God of Love is not the cosmic tyrant, not the cosmic puppet-master, for the gift of love is always the gift of some due degree of independence to the object of love. Parents know that – we have to allow our children as they grow up to be themselves and to make themselves, with all the risks that go with that. Little Johnny or little Jean learns to ride a bicycle and the time comes when they have to be allowed to go out on their own into the dangerous traffic. God takes risks with creation in allowing creation to be itself. So this world exists, if you like, at some distance from its Creator. God is veiled from our sight and we exist at some distance from our Creator as we are allowed that creaturely freedom. And a world of that character *has* to be a world of death and transience. In an evolving world, death is an absolute necessity, for each generation has to give way to the next generation. That's how the process proceeds. The very same processes that have driven the amazing three and a half to four billion year history of life on earth, first of all two billion years of only bacteria, and now with the richness and variety life has today, that process has been driven by the process of genetic mutation. That's how new forms of life have come into being. But it's inevitable that if some cells (germ cells they would be called) can mutate and produce new forms of life, it's inevitable that other cells will be able to mutate and become malignant. The fact that there is cancer in the world, agonizing and anguishing though that is, is not gratuitous. It's not something that a Creator who was a little bit more compassionate, or a bit more competent, could easily have got rid of. It's the necessary cost of a world allowed to make itself. It's the shadow side of an evolving creation. The matter of this world intrinsically gives rise to creatures of transience and death because that's the nature that this world has to be.

But that's not God's final purpose for creation. God's final purpose for creation, as I see it, is not that creatures exist forever at some distance from God, but ultimately they will be drawn freely and of their own will into union with the life and energies of God. God isn't going to keep creatures at a distance for ever. But they are not going to be pulled in by puppet strings. They are going to be drawn in by their response to the love of God, and of course as a Christian I believe that Christ, who combines both human and divine nature, is the bridge linking the life of God and the life of creatures, the way by which that drawing into the life of God will eventually take place.

So the new creation, the destiny that lies beyond death, is going to be different because it's going to be in a different relationship to its Creator. It's going to be in a more intimate and open relationship to its creator. And again it seems to me entirely theologically credible that the matter of that world will be different in its character from the matter of



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this world. That's how I see it, and one way of putting it would be this: We live in a world which contains sacraments. There are special covenanted occasions when the veil between God's presence and creatures is thinned a bit, and we are more aware of God's presence with us. The world to come will be totally sacramental. It will be alive in, and suffused by, the light and energies of God. And that's why that world will be different.

And where will that new matter come from? Well, I believe it will come as the transformed matter of this world. I said the whole universe must have a destiny beyond its death, just as you and I will have a destiny beyond our death, and those two destinies lie together. That's again something that Paul is wrestling with in I Corinthians 15. He uses these mysterious phrases – in the Greek they are *soma psychikon* and *soma pneumatikon* – pretty untranslatable phrases. They are usually rendered as something like a “natural body” and a “spiritual body”, but the spiritual body doesn't mean a body made of spirit. That's an oxymoron. It means a body suffused with the presence of spirit. In both cases it's a *body*, that's the continuity; the two different adjectives represent the discontinuity side of things. That's a mysterious hope, but I think it's a credible hope, and an exciting hope. I'll come back a little bit at the end for another reason for accepting that hope.

But for the moment I want to say a little bit more about the continuity side of things, because there are other things that we know about in this world which are going to be, in appropriate ways – no doubt transformed ways – characteristic of the life of the world to come. I believe very strongly that just as it is intrinsic for human beings to be embodied in some sort of way, so it is intrinsic to us to be temporal beings. Therefore I think there is going to be “time” in the world to come. It will not be the mere continuation of the time of this world and it may have a very subtle relationship to the time of this world, but it will be truly temporal. Sometimes people have pictured our eternal destiny as being a timeless moment of illumination, but I don't think that's possible for human beings. We are finite beings and we can only take in the infinite riches of God step by step by step, in a sort of process. So there will be time and there will be unfolding process in the life of the world to come. That's another important part of the continuity. If you learn anything about God from thinking about the history of this world, you will learn that God the Creator is patient and subtle. God works through the unfolding of process and not by snapping the divine fingers in an act of instantaneous magic. That's why it took 14 billion years for human beings, God-conscious beings, to appear in the history of the universe, as far as we know. So that I think there will be process in the world to come, an unfolding process, and there will be a sort of time in the world to come, and that we wouldn't be human without it.

What will that process be like? Well, it's going to have a lot of elements in it. One of the elements it's going to have in it – this is where I come to the, to some, possibly slightly shocking part of what I have to say this evening – will be purgation. We are going to die, not only with our lives incomplete and our hurts unhealed, but we're going to die with an awful lot of dross in our lives. And somehow that dross has to be cleared away. If we are to enter more closely into the presence of a holy God we shall ourselves have to be purified, and that will be a process of purgation. So I think purgatory is a pretty reasonable thing to believe in. Of course purgatory got a bad name, and a deservedly bad name, at the end of the Middle Ages and at the Reformation because it had got distorted and demeaned. Purgatory isn't a place that you buy your friends out of by dropping silver coins in friars' collecting boxes. Of course not, that's an absurd thing to think. But purgatory is a process by which we are made ready for the presence of God.

I very much like the picture of purgatory that you get in Dante's *Purgatorio*. Purgatory there is a mountain symbolically uniting earth to heaven and there are seven sorts of levels on the mountain, corresponding to the seven



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deadly sins. And at each level you are purified from one of those deadly sins. And every time someone moves up from one level to the next the whole mountain shakes with Hallelujahs – the rejoicing that that soul has taken one further step towards their heavenly destiny. That's a very positive, hopeful, exciting view of purgatory, and I think that's part of what lies ahead of us. Another thing that lies ahead of us, of course, is judgment, something that goes, perhaps, hand in hand with purgation. And judgment is a hopeful word: judgment is not appearing before a sort of celestial Judge Jeffreys who is testily angry and longing to throw you into prison and eternal torture. Judgment is coming to terms with reality. Our judgment will be to see ourselves as we actually are, and that will be a necessary step in relation to purgation. It will also be a painful step, because there are many things in our lives that we are going to regret, but ultimately the concept is hopeful. Then, eventually, what's the life of heaven going to be like? Sometimes people say, you know, I wouldn't mind a bit more life to be given in this world, a few thousand years maybe, but everlasting life? – I don't want that. It would be boring. Even the chap who said "I'm going to play golf every day when I go to heaven" might get a bit tired of the game after a thousand years of playing around the celestial golf courses. That would be undoubtedly true if our life in heaven depended upon our finite resources. But life in heaven is going to be the unending exploration of the inexhaustible riches of the divine nature, and that I think will never be boring. It isn't going to be strumming a harp and sitting on a cloud and shouting Hallelujah all the time, but it's going to be something deep and rich and endlessly satisfying. So heaven is something to look forward to, I think.

And who's going to be there? Well, I think there's another continuity we need to take into account. We believe that God is merciful and loving and I don't think God's nature changes in the world to come either. I don't think that the God who is merciful and loving in this world puts down a curtain at death, and if you are caught on the wrong side of the curtain, God says, "Too bad. You had your chance for 70-80 years, you missed it. Off you go." That's incredible. That's not the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. I don't think God's offer of love and mercy and acceptance will ever be withdrawn. Now I'm not saying it doesn't matter what you do in this life. If you turn deliberately from God in this life, if you deny truth or obedience in this life to the insights that come to you, that is a very spiritually dangerous thing to do, and it will be more painful and more difficult to turn towards God in the life of the world to come, but I don't think it will be impossible, so I think God's love and mercy are always going to be available. But will everybody take it? I feel pretty sure myself that nobody is going to be carried kicking and screaming into the kingdom of heaven against their will. It has ultimately to be a free choice.

So will there be people who will resist God forever? Well, I don't know. Obviously we all hope not, and I'm sure God hopes not more than anybody else. But it does seem to me it's a possibility. And if there are such people, then they are in hell. And they are there not because they've been thrown there by an angry God who has just lost patience with them, they are there – and this is the tragedy of hell – because they chose to be there. And hell is not a place of torment painted red – I don't very much like Dante's *Inferno*. Hell's not a place painted red but it's a place painted grey for boredom, because the life of God, which is the only real life at the end of the day, has been excluded from hell. And the gates of hell, as the preachers like to say, are locked on the inside, not on the outside to keep people in, but on the inside to keep God out. So that will be a dull, dreary, perhaps eventually fading away kind of life. The best picture of hell I know is not in the *Inferno* but in CS Lewis's *Great Divorce* where Hell, you'll remember, is a dreary town lost down a crack in the floor of heaven and the inhabitants of hell are offered a bus trip up to heaven from time to time. They go up and have a look and see whether they might like to stay there, and they go up on the bus



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but on the whole they don't like heaven. It's too real for them. The grass cuts their feet. They meet somebody against whom they have nourished a lifelong grudge. That person is welcoming and accepting to them and says, "Let go of that grudge. We can be friends now," and they don't want to do it. At the end of the day most of them get on the bus and go back down to that grey and dreary town. That's hell, I think. And it's a pretty frightening picture of hell, actually, if you take it seriously.

Well, I've almost come to the end of what I want to say. Obviously, you may have detected that there's a certain element of speculation in what I have had to say this evening. Yet I think it's a justified speculation, in this sense. I have been trying to ask the question: Can we make some sort of sense of the universe; is there some credibility in the notion of a life beyond death? I've tried to explore that in a number of ways, though in the end the answer to most of these questions is: wait and see. Nevertheless I think we do need to explore it a bit, as I have tried to do this evening.

Although there is a lot of speculation in what I have said this evening, there are what I believe to be two non-speculative grounds for the whole discussion. One of them is the ground I started with at the beginning – a trust and belief in the faithfulness of God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God not of the dead but of the living. And of course the other ground of our understanding of a destiny beyond death lies in our Christian belief, if we have that belief, in the resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ. In the New Testament Christ's resurrection is seen as being the seminal event, the seed from which the new creation has already begun to grow. In some sense the old creation and the new creation exist at the moment alongside each other. Christ's resurrection is the beginning, and what was special about Christ's resurrection was that it occurred *within* history as the foretaste and guarantee of the destiny that awaits all of us, if we will embrace it, *beyond* history. Again as my friend St Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "As in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive." The stories of the Lord's appearances are stories that I take very seriously, and those stories are shot through with this theme of continuity and discontinuity. Jesus appears, and his body bears the scars of the passion. It is him. But there is discontinuity also. He's hard to recognize. That's one of the very striking things about the stories. Almost all the appearance stories concentrate on a moment of disclosure when suddenly people realize: that's who it is. They don't see it immediately. So he's changed in some way. And of course he appears and disappears, so his body is different, and he is alive and glorified, I believe, for evermore.

And the story of the Lord's empty tomb is also important because that says to us that the Lord's risen and glorified body is the transmuted form of his dead body. Christianity really does take the embodiment, the materiality of human beings, very, very seriously. You could easily imagine, couldn't you, a Gospel story in which Jesus appears in some spiritual form to his disciples and he points down to the discarded husk of his dead body and says: I don't need that any more. But that's not the Gospel story. The Gospel story is that the tomb is empty and that the Lord's risen body is the transmuted and glorified form of his dead body. And what that says to me is that in Christ there is a hope, not only for humanity, but for matter. Because the matter of the Lord's risen body is the redeemed form of the matter of his dead body. Cosmic destiny and human destiny belong together.

So what I want to say is this: what we have been discussing this evening in one sense is the question: does the universe make sense – not just sense today, or sense in the past – does it make sense forever? Do we really live in a cosmos or a chaos? If there is simply the horizontal science story to tell, then I think my friend Steve Weinberg is more or less right. In the end it's rather a pointless story. But I believe that we do live in a cosmos and it makes sense



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because there is a destiny beyond death and there is a destiny beyond death because there is a faithful Creator. And I think it's extremely important that the Church does not lose its nerve in proclaiming that hope to our generation.

Bibliographical Note

The material in this lecture is derived from J C Polkinghorne, *The God of Hope and the End of the World* (SPCK/Yale University Press, 2002) where more detailed discussion is given on these and related issues.

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