

John Docherty, 2020-05-24

The Promise of Eternal Life

Let me start by sharing a couple of personal details about myself that may seem innocuous, or trivial, but that in fact have a direct bearing on understanding who I am. First: I have a scar on the bridge of my nose that has been there since I was 5 or 6. Second, I have a birthmark on my chest, right here. That's all I'll say about these facts for the moment, but I'll come back to them later.

I suppose it's fairly obvious from my meditations that I have some ambivalence about some of the nuances of orthodox Christian teaching around the meaning of salvation. That is to say, salvation was assured for humanity when Christ conquered death – for those who believe. Everybody else is lost.

A large part of me would like to be a universalist who believes that all of humanity is covered by the saving grace of Jesus' death, without exception. And I'm drawn to that belief when I read passages like the following :

1 Corinthians 15: “²²For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.”

Romans 5: “¹²Therefore, as sin entered into the world through one man, and death through sin; and so death passed to all men, because all sinned. ...¹⁵But the free gift isn't like the trespass. For if by the trespass of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God, and the gift by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. ...¹⁸So then as through one trespass, all men were condemned; even so through one act of righteousness, all men were justified to life. ...”

And I want to believe that this marvellous gift of life is so much more powerful than the trespass that brought death when I read that last verse “^{5:18}So then as through one trespass, all men were condemned; even so through one act of righteousness, all men were justified to life.”

And yet, as I say that, there's a part of me that resists, and feels maybe there *are* some who don't deserve God's mercy and eternal life. Maybe there are people who legitimately deserve to be excluded from any offer of eternal life.

I don't personally include in that group any who earnestly seek to follow God in a way that differs from mine. I'm much more concerned about those who seem oblivious to, or

don't care about, the great harm and suffering they are leaving in their wake as they make their way through this life:

- The powermongers and warmongers,
- the Hitlers of the world,
- the Stalins,
- the torturers who are still active today, and those who render humans into the hands of torturers,
- the kid who smashed me across the bridge of my nose with a spade when I was 5 or six leaving the scar I told you about at the beginning of this talk.

The horror of that attack on my person was significant enough that I still remember it vividly some 60 years later. It marked me, physically and in other ways, and there's a small part of me that hopes that kid rots in hell for what he did to me. At least for a little while.

Of course, in my more generous moments, I remember that that kid was only 5 or 6, like me.

And in my more contrite moments, I remember that the attack on the bridge of my nose was preceded some minutes earlier by my chasing him around with a homemade whip that I succeeded in wrapping around his ankles causing him to fall face first on the pavement.

I have no idea where he is today, but it wouldn't shock me to learn he's behind a pulpit somewhere expressing the hope that *I* rot in Hell for what I did to *him*.

That also sometimes leads me to remember that by the time we emigrated from Scotland when I was seven, I had had the police called on me on at least one occasion for beating someone up;

I had developed the habit of scrounging cigarette butts from around the neighbourhood and smoking them at the end of our street;

I had gotten the strap at school on at least one occasion and had been responsible for figuring out how to break into the schoolyard to vandalise the place, ... although I eventually turned into a boy scout, I didn't start out that way.

By mentioning these foibles of mine I certainly don't want to trivialise the more serious abuses of human rights that I mentioned earlier. I believe very deeply that it matters, in the greater scheme of things, how we treat each other.

What I want to suggest is that all of these acts of violence, hate and contempt sit on a continuum, and that the lines between the simply inappropriate, the unacceptable, and the intolerable are not always so clear cut.

Growing up as a good catholic I was taught that there are different categories of sins. Venial sins were sins, but they were not overly serious – one's eternal life wasn't in danger, though one might have to pay the consequences of extra time in purgatory if they weren't dealt with. Mortal sins were another matter altogether – these were serious infractions that put you at risk of some heavy-duty punishment, i.e. hell, if you didn't repent and seek forgiveness. But even mortal sins could be forgiven.

The point is that even the most horrific act doesn't necessarily put one outside the reach of God's mercy and love. If there is repentance, there is an offer of forgiveness and the promise of eternal life.

My favourite version of the gospel story is John's. Like a lot of people, I've always drawn a lot of inspiration from the "I AM" statements of Jesus (I am the Way, the Truth the Life; I am the Son of God; I am the Bread of life; I am the Vine; I am the Light of the World; I am the door of the sheep; I am the Good Shepherd; I am the resurrection and the Life; I am.).

But it's also the gospel in which Jesus most often raises the prospect of Eternal Life to those who will listen. John makes constant reference to this promise in a way that none of the other gospel writers does. Matthew uses the phrase three times; Mark uses the phrase twice; Luke uses the phrase three times; John uses it 17 times. And he uses it in a way that seems to be trying to drive home a point – that you can't take this eternal life for granted.

And yet, unless one believes that non-believers will simply be wiped out, then eternal life seems to be the lot of all humanity. There is one understanding of Christianity that teaches that believers will spend eternity in God's presence, and that non-believers will spend eternity in torment. The Jews of the day believed that humankind would be raised from the dead at the end of time – some to judgment and punishment, some to a life of reward with God. Either way, the promise is for everlasting life in both cases.

So the promise is not for a certain ‘quantity’ of life. Everyone can hope to exist for eternity. The question is ‘how’ one wants to spend that eternity, and here we start to grapple with the idea that maybe what is being offered is not so much a ‘quantity’ of life, but a ‘quality’ of life.

I don’t personally believe that the choice is between bliss and torment. I don’t believe our scriptures teach that if we don’t “accept Christ” that we will spend eternity in Hell. I don’t believe our scriptures teach that there is such a place, or reality, as Hell. The closest we get to that is a parable that speaks of an abyss between those who love God and those who don’t, and a reference in the Revelation of John to a lake of fire, that is described as “the second death”. It’s not much to build a set of dogmas on. (and, in passing, the judgment in Revelation is based on good works, not on belief systems).

What I believe our scriptures *do* teach, is that our spiritual destiny is intimately wrapped up with *this* life and the choices we make here and now.

Here. And Now. These are interesting words. These 2 little words *absolutely* define your existence and my existence. The sum total of my experience of life is presently limited to **here**, this spot, right here. It’s limited to what I can feel, to what I can smell, to what I can see, and to what I can hear. In this space. I’m not anywhere else. I’m not currently sitting in my office or standing behind the pulpit at MFM - I’m limited to **this** space.

Now is a little trickier. I live in **this** moment, to the exclusion of all others. Yesterday is no longer, tomorrow is not yet.

I live **now**, no ... **now** ... no, wait ... **now**.

Ach, I live in this moment, but unlike this space that may be rather unmoving and stable, this ‘time’ is ever-changing, yet never-changing. I only ever live in the moment, and that is unchanging.

And yet – I carry with me every moment of my existence to date. All of my ‘past’ is a part of my ‘now’, in my memories, in the relationships that have been built over time, in my appreciation of the things I have gained and those I’ve lost.

But my **now** is also affected by the **not-yet** of my life :

- my plans for lunch,
- my anticipation of what kind of vacation we might be able to have this summer,

- my thoughts of what my retirement might be like,
- my ruminations on eternity.

I accept that the people to whom Jesus addressed his words probably accepted the promise of eternal life as a promise of everlasting life. But - confession time. I am incapable of grasping the notion of ‘everlasting’. I can’t conceive of something without end. Or without beginning, for that matter. That doesn't quite apply to God – I can almost get my head around the fact that God exists in an eternal “now”.

But whether we’re talking about time without end, or space without end, I can’t wrap my head around it.

I consider myself a reasonably intelligent person, but I’m limited by my own experience of life that sees things in a linear fashion : things start, they progress along a particular path, they end. Yes, some of these things can happen in a cyclical fashion, but they are still locked into a ‘time’ frame.

If I try to grasp the implications of a universe that goes on forever in space, I’m left stumbling.

If I try to imagine a physical universe that stops at some point in space, after which there is nothing, a vacuum, a void – I stagger.

I can’t conceive of ‘nothing’, beyond the edges of the physical matter that makes up our universe. I think I’ve heard that Einstein conceived of some kind of ‘twist’ in the universe that would wrap time and space back on itself like a mobius strip. Good for him – I don’t get it.

Likewise, I can’t get my head around ‘time’, except as a reference tool for measuring how space changes.

If I try to grasp the implications of a universe that goes on forever in time, I’m left stumbling.

If I try to imagine a physical universe that stops at some point in time, after which, or before which, there is nothing, a vacuum, a void – I stagger.

I can’t conceive of ‘no-time’, beyond the edges of the physical matter that makes up our universe.

What I *can* get my head around, is the notion that ‘eternal’ life, as defined in today's reading from John 17, is a particular quality of life. Not quality in the sense of freedom from suffering, or abundance of happiness, but quality in the sense of a life infused with a certain ‘feel’;

a life defined by things of an ‘eternal’ nature;

a life shaped by, and drawn towards, God.

John specifically states in verse 3 : “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

I almost chose as a title for this meditation : “Who wants to live forever?” It’s a bit of a rhetorical question, but not entirely. Brian May, guitarist for the band Queen, asks the question in one of their songs, but he adds the qualifier: “When love has died”. As a supreme romantic, he poses the question in terms of human love for another – “Who wants to live forever when the one you love has died?”

But what if one cast the question in terms of the love of God? Would you want to live forever if God’s love were removed from your life? If each moment were marked by solitude and emptiness? If you were without hope or expectation? Would you want to even live out the few decades offered to you in this life under those circumstances?

In his book, *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis has a wonderful picture of the afterlife. As a good Anglican, he goes to some lengths to emphasize that he is not speculating on what the afterlife will really be like, but only speculating on the nature of our spiritual pilgrimage (elsewhere, he suggests that our attempts to imagine what heaven is like is a little like a child trying to understand why grownups like to sleep together. The child understands that there is something very special about this, and concludes that it *must be* because they eat chocolate in bed).

Lewis' main character in the *Great Divorce* has just died, and finds himself in a world of constant twilight, at a bus stop waiting for the bus that will carry him forward to the borders of heaven. He paints a picture of an immense mountain, where God sits at the summit, and the main character discovers that he needs to keep moving up the sides of the mountain toward God if he wants to reach heaven.

Not everyone on the bus is happy with the prospect of the climb, and some fall away, finding it easier to go back than to go forward.

He discovers also, though, that as each person moves closer to God, they are naturally moving closer to each other as they make their way up the mountainside towards the pinnacle. And, as each person moves away from God, they are naturally moving farther away from each other as they move out into the darkness of space by themselves.

It's a wonderful image, to my mind. It basically recognizes that we are all of us, at any given moment, moving toward God, or away from God, and that this direction of movement will define in some measure how close or far we are from our neighbours. The direction of movement also gives a hint of the nature of the quality of life we enjoy. As we move toward God, our horizon is suffused with a holy light, that colours all around us, filling us with hope and a sense of pleasure in the journey, as well as the growing nearness of those who are climbing in the same direction.

As we move in the opposite direction, though, we face the darkness of shadow, with the setting sun of God at our back. We can't even enjoy the beauty of the sunset, because all we see is the darkening edge of our world, and even those who are likewise moving away from God are less and less close to us.

Lewis suggests that the one who makes it to heaven may well look back on every stage of his or her life as part of this heavenly existence, with little to distinguish one stage from another, and the appreciation that even this earth is a part of heaven, because God was there with us.

The one who, on the other hand, moves away from God, may well look back on all of his or her existence as a continuum marked by darkness and loss, and the appreciation that even this earth is a part of Hell.

The point here is that our relationship to God must mark, in some way, our existence. It has to colour how we see the world and how we relate to those who share it with us. If we are followers of Christ we are promised 'Eternal' life, a life marked by things eternal, marked by a God whose eternal nature is somehow conveyed to *us*. An eternal nature that is not only, and perhaps not even principally, 'never-ending', but rather a nature that is qualitatively different from what we have experienced to that point. We are offered a life so dramatically changed that it is in its essence a 'new birth'.

The scar I told you about earlier is almost gone now. As the years have taken their toll, the bridge of my nose has become less and less marked by that one event, and my body has largely repaired itself.

My earlier suggestion that a small part of me hoped the kid who did it would rot in hell is actually a bit of a fabrication. I realize that kids will be kids, and that all of us are capable of hurting each other in a variety of ways.

Part of *my* experience of eternal life is that I'm learning to put these kinds of hurts into perspective. Most of them are petty and needn't unduly disturb the equilibrium God offers. I can let them go and move on. Some of them are more important, and need to be addressed, but they need to be addressed from an eternal perspective, from within a set of values that help ensure the possibility of reconciliation where fracture has occurred, and forgiveness or remorse depending on whether I'm a victim or perpetrator of the hurt.

You each probably have scars of your own that mark who you are in some way. Some of them may be physical ... I suspect most of them aren't. They're scars that only you are aware of. The person, or persons, responsible for them may not even know they've hurt you. But you carry them with you and you either suffer their presence, or see them as a badge of merit. If you've embraced the idea of 'eternal life', you need to come to terms with these scars and find a way of embracing the 'life-giving' components of that promise, rather than letting the scars interfere with your ability to enjoy this life to the full.

I also said that I have a birthmark, right here. When I was quite young, this birthmark was quite evident, like a giant freckle. It stood out, perfectly situated in the space created at the top of my open shirt, and shining out as a beacon that I was somebody special. I was *marked*. Not negatively, as by the scar on my nose, but positively, by God, who had put a sign on my body.

As you might imagine, as a child I had some serious self-image issues, as well as some frightening levels of insecurity. I often dreamt that I could fly, and hated waking up in the morning, because my dream life was so much more satisfying than my waking life. To this day, waking up in the morning and having to get out of bed is still the worst moment of most days. Yet, part of my experience of eternal life is that I no longer dread waking up in the mornings, and I don't rue the fact that my birthmark is now pretty much invisible.

I'm not in need of some proof that I'm special – I *know* I'm special, just as *you* are special, and just as the kid who smashed me across the bridge of the nose is special – very special.

So tell me, how is *your* life becoming 'eternal' as you follow Jesus?