



St Marylebone
Parish Church

Sunday after Ascension 2019 Choral Eucharist 11.00am

Look at the Mappa Mundi, or wonderful medieval carvings and wall paintings in churches. When we look upon these things we look into a world populated by not just men and women, but spirits, angels, goblins and ghouls. A way of living always aware of the unknown world beyond, or rather worlds byond. Even for those of us who come from cultures and societies still very much in touch with the unseen; typically, our forebears lived in a multilayered universe even more full of superstition, darkness and light.

On Thursday, Christians marked the Ascension of the Lord. 40 days after the Resurrection He went up to take up His heavenly throne. 40 days before He had done the opposite: He was down emptying hell. He died on the Friday, and descended to the dead. **'Hell seized a body and met God face to face'** says St John Chrysostom. Having smashed the gates of death, on the third day rose again. And then, after 40 days appearing to His friends, He

ascended into heaven. Thanks to his Ascension, a human being whole and real is in heaven – He has gone before us so that we might follow Him home. We will sing of our faith in this in a moment. I love the way the music of the Creed even takes us up as we sing of the Ascension – [choir member to sing!?!] our voice and bodies praying, being swept up into these events.

The point is, in the Creed and in these events in which we have participated since Holy Week, **we** acknowledge a multilayered universe too: The descent into hell, life on earth, and the ascension into heaven. Earth, heaven, and hell: a multi layered universe – a three-story universe, if you like.

But we know that simplistic ‘it’s just beyond that cloud’ views of heaven, and ‘don’t dig too deep, Dave, or you’ll hit the devil on the head with your shovel’ views of hell are a nonsense. We know that much of the superstition attached to the world by our forebears were simply pagan worldly values glued onto Christian theology. We don’t see the world as our forebears did, thank goodness. But perhaps, just perhaps, in our efforts to dispense with medieval peasant superstition, we have simply glued a different set of pagan assumptions onto our faith.

We have swapped their superstitious multi layered pagan universe, for another **still pagan** universe – just a flat one. It’s no more Christian. Mystery has been swapped for capitalist market conceptions of value and meaning. We have exchanged ghoulish spiritual powers for the cult

of choice, so-called-freedom and individualism in the basic building blocks of our world view.

Our public conversation today, and thus so often our way of living in our families, and communities and even within ourselves, has become so black and white: 'no longer than a soundbite' and with so little capacity for nuance and complexity.

Christ's descent into hell and ascension into heaven suggest that we need to recover the multi layers but in a truly Christian way.

Heaven and Hell are real. **One** of the reasons we know that is because we have the capacity to be living them now. Heaven is the fullness of life with our creator – lost in ecstatic wonder, love and praise forever. We have the capacity to start glimpsing that now. In prayer, in Holy Communion, in the love we share with other human beings, in all sorts of ways; we glimpse now what will drench us like a glorious ocean wave, then. That's why a balanced life of tending our relationships with each other and being dedicated to our Spiritual health with regular times of prayer and frequent reception of Holy Communion is such an important foundation for a full life. Likewise, hell is to be cut off from life's source. Isolation. The opposite of going with Jesus into life is to imagine that the triumph of man is to stand on his own two feet; to know and possess and cause himself. That is hell, because that is the mistake the ancient Jewish scriptures tell us the

devil made. In great Eastern icons of the Resurrection, Jesus stands over the doors of hell that He has smashed off their hinges and is leading Adam and Eve and all their descendants out, **by the hand**, from death to life. By the hand.

Self-dependence is death. Loving union is life.

Those are true of the realities of heaven and hell, and they begin to become true for us on this side of death. There's too much to reflect on here for a single sermon. But I just wanted to begin to tease out some of the theological meat of these great days, of the events of Easter that lie at the heart of history. This multi-layered universe in which we find ourselves – in a truly Christian way not simply a mash of ancient or modern pagan perspectives. These great realities in our every-day lives. This great story of God in Christ in which we find our lives **is** the true story of the universe. There are always more questions than answers – Jesus' disciples found that too. Jesus himself answers questions with questions more often than not. Think about your place and role in our public discourse today, and your personal life in the light of the invitation to a Christian worldview before us today. The key is to take up our place in this great story. In a full-blooded, full-fat, caffeinated way. To ask the questions and to always – in all things, now, and in the our of our death – to take the outstretched hand of Jesus as we do.