

## Thirty-second Sunday: Heaven

Sometimes you come to Church and the priests give you hell. Today's readings encourage the priests to give you heaven.

Let's start with the first reading. The first reading certainly appears to be quite negative. It is the grueling account of the torture of seven brothers from the *Second Book of Maccabees*. This took place about 160 years before Jesus when the Syrians attempted to eliminate the Jewish religion. Just as 300 years later Christians would be told to curse Jesus or die, the Jews were told to perform an action in direct opposition to the Law of Moses or die. The particular action in this reading was eating pork. But this was not just about biting into a McRib sandwich. It was about rejecting the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The early Christians who were persecuted by Jews and Gentiles alike saw *Maccabees* as encouraging them to remain committed to their faith despite attacks from others. That is why they included this book in the Bible, even though it was written much later than most of the other books of Hebrew scriptures.

There is something very positive in the grisly account we just heard, though. As the brothers were dying, each proclaimed that they trusted in God to raise them up to heaven. Heaven is a reality that Jesus also speaks about in today's Gospel when he is confronted by the Sadducees who refuse to accept the possibility of life after death. Jesus, siding with the Pharisees in this case who believed in the resurrection of the dead, dismissed the Sadducees' arguments about whose wife would that woman with seven dead husbands be after she died. Basically he told them that their question was rather infantile. He said that the reality of life after death is beyond human comprehension. "They are like angels and are children of God."

Many of us view heaven as though it were earth done right. This is due to our staying on the concrete level of thinking of the little child, where everything needs to be seen and experienced. So we picture our loved ones on a golf course where every drive is up the fairway and every putt goes in. They are playing tennis and every stroke is perfect. They are pitching no-hitters and hitting home runs. We consider those who have gone before us, and are looking forward to once more having a good laugh with dear old Dad as we watch the Bucs win another Superbowl. But the spiritual is so much more, infinitely more, than our minds can grasp. We do not know what it is like to be "like the angels," because we cannot comprehend angelic life, but we do know that it will be better than our fondest imagination.

In the third book of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the *Paradisio*, Dante ascends through the ten spheres of heaven. He comes upon various souls who inhabit each sphere. The inhabitants are able to tolerate deeper and deeper amounts of God's love than those of the sphere below them. This is all still envisioning heaven in very concrete terms, but then Dante changes the level of thinking. He is led by St. Bernard to Mary, Queen of Heaven. St. Bernard asks her to pray to God that Dante may look upon Him. She does, and Dante looks into the Eternal Light. He sees the image of the Holy Trinity and ponders the mysteries of God. All of a sudden there is a brilliant flash

of light as God bestows all the answers to all questions upon Dante. At that point Dante's soul is at one with God.

Now, this is merely Dante's explanation of heaven. I see its value in the way it ends. Dante is no longer bound by physical concepts but is totally united to God. There are times in our lives when we feel a deep peace. These are the times that we are one with God. Imagine if that union, that peace, were total and eternal. As Mercy Me sang, "I can only imagine."

We were created to know, love and serve God in this life and to be happy with Him forever in the next. That's from the old Baltimore catechism that old fogies like me memorized when we were seven or eight years old. Terminology may change through the years, but the basic truths remain the same. Heaven is that place, that state of being, where we are happily united with God forever. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, released in 1992, in commenting on *Our Father Who art in heaven* says that heaven, the Father's house, is the true homeland toward which we are heading and to which, already, we belong." (CCC 2802).

St. Paul tells the Corinthians that if our hope is in this world only we are the most pitiable of men (1 Cor 15:19). There is far more to life than the physical. St. Paul also writes, "The eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, ....what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Cor 2:9). There are wonders beyond our imagination waiting for us.

The Almighty Creator of the universe loves us so much that he sent his son to become one of us and die for us. Now when we love someone, we want to give him or her everything we can to express our love. God gave us His Son in this life. What must he have in store for us in the next life? The answer to that question can merely be summarized in the term, heaven.

We are only on this world for a brief time. We have to make the most of the period of our lives that is both physical and spiritual. We do this by leading the physical to the spiritual. That is why we are called to nurture the Presence of Christ within ourselves. That is why we are called to make Christ present to others. We only have one life. We pray today for the courage to allow God to perfect this life.

May we always be united to Him, here and hereafter.