

HEAVEN

When someone close to us dies we are led to reflect on what our faith assures us about life after death and what kind of experience it might be.

We believe in the resurrection of the dead—that is one of the articles of our faith. We believe that God's love is stronger than death. During the funeral service we express our 'sure and certain hope that together with all who have died in Christ, [the deceased person] will rise with him'.

We believe that in death life is changed, not ended. It will be a life in which 'every tear will be wiped away'. We pray that the deceased loved one will 'rest in peace', will 'enter into eternal rest'.

In heaven we will be granted the vision of God as He is—the 'Beatific vision'—the joy of seeing God face to face.

We are led to ponder the mystery of God, insofar as we are given tantalising insights into it. We talk as though we know a lot about God, when in fact God is the mystery of mysteries, utterly other.

We know some things about God from what God has revealed to us. God has revealed Godself as a trinity, a community of Father, Son and Spirit. St John the evangelist tells us that 'God is love' (1John 4:8). All Jesus' life and ministry, his giving of himself, is a revelation of God.

All our deepest feelings help us know God—in the words of St Augustine: 'You have made us for yourself, O Lord and our hearts are restless till they rest in thee' (*Confessions* Bk 1).

We can know something about the mystery of God from the things that He has made. The dimensions of the universe give some insight. The universe, as far as it can be observed scientifically, is 93 billion light

years across, and when we consider that light travels at the speed of 186,000 miles per second, the result is staggering. The Jesuit poet, Gerard Manly Hopkins, wrote in his poem, 'God's grandeur', that 'the world is charged with the grandeur of God'. When we say that the blessed see God face to face, the mystery of heaven only deepens.

We pray that the deceased may exalt forever in the glorious home of heaven, that perpetual light will shine upon him/her. We believe that the deceased will see the good things of the Lord in the land of the living, that he or she will enter into the light of God's face.

We think of heaven as the dwelling place of God, the angels and the blessed, where the deceased 'rejoice with the saints forever' (*Prayer of the Church*). Saints united joy without end at an *eternal banquet*.

Christ ascended to the Father's right hand. The blessed share the resurrection and the reign of Christ: 'If we have died with him, we shall also live with him; if we endure we will also reign with him' (2Tim 2. 11-12).

John the evangelist teaches that heaven is being with Christ: 'In my Father's house there are many dwelling places ... I go to prepare a place for you and I will come again and I will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.' (Jn 14.2-3)

When our loved ones go to heaven they are entering into a mysterious and mysteriously wonderful state. Heaven is more a quality of life in its full maturity and perfection in the presence of God than a place located anywhere. As we say in the funeral liturgy:

There is sadness in parting, but we take comfort in the hope that one day the love of God will gather us together in the joy of the kingdom.

—Barry Brundell MSC, Editor