

The Intermediate State (Lk.16:19-31)

What happens to us in the period between our death and the resurrection on the last day? The Bible does not tell us much about this. Today's gospel and one text from Paul are the only texts that give us a hint. Paul says in 1Thess.4:15: "We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have fallen asleep." So Paul seems to suggest that we are asleep during the interim period. And even that is not sure, because the NRSV prefers the translation "those who are dead".

Our gospel story certainly does not indicate that the dead are asleep. The rich man, who is tormented in Hades (the place of the dead), sees Abraham and the poor man Lazarus with him. He calls out to Abraham: "Please send Lazarus to comfort me." Abraham replies: "Impossible, you had your good time on earth, now Lazarus has his good time with me. Moreover, no one can pass from here to you." The rich man then thinks of his five brothers who are still alive. So he asks that Lazarus be sent down to warn them. Abraham, quite rightly, says: "They have the Bible (Moses and the prophets), that should be sufficient."

It is clear that Jesus did not tell this story to enlighten his followers about the intermediate state. But rather to warn them and us for the consequences of our behaviour on earth. If we indulge in our luxuries without concern for the poor at our doorstep, then we shall suffer for this after our death in Hades. Those who have suffered poverty and misery on earth, will be comforted after their death in Abraham's arms, in paradise.

Hades is the Greek translation of the Hebrew term Sheol, which in Jewish thinking is the place for the departed spirits, the place of waiting before the final judgment on the last day. So it is not a place of torment, except being tormented by one's bad conscience in fear of the final judgment. So when it says in the Creed that Jesus descended into hell, this refers to his visiting the departed spirits in Hades.

Paradise is the Persian name for a walled garden. As such it is used in the Greek translation of the OT (the Septuagint) for the garden of Eden. It gradually came to mean the place for the blessed spirits. In this sense, Jesus used it in his promise to the repentant criminal crucified with him: "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Lk.23:43). In view of what is said in the Creed, it would seem that Hades and Paradise are not really two different places. Both are the abode of the dead. All this means that the Bible doesn't give us a clear picture of the intermediate state.

A clearer picture can be derived from the so-called near-death-experiences (NDE). These are the experiences related by the one in five of those who have been successfully reanimated after a cardiac arrest. They find themselves floating above

their body on which doctors and nurses are working, they can hear them talking to each other, but cannot talk back to them. They are then drawn into a dark tunnel, from which they emerge in a world of light. There they meet loved ones who died before them. Some see a person of light, who might be Jesus. Many of them report a life review, in which they see in a flash their entire life and all instances where they did wrong. Then they are pulled back through the tunnel and re-enter their body.

Are these experiences real? Or are they artefacts of the near-death situation of the body? Several suggestions have been made: oxygen lack in the brain, hallucinations, medication, secretion of endorfin (a morphine-like compound made in our body). But these can all be excluded. So NDE appears to be real.

The question is: what is happening during a NDE? Both bible and neuroscience tell us that a living person is a unity of body and spirit (or mind). Our spirit uses the brain and its neuronal networks to communicate. The brain during a NDE is dead; the neuronal networks do not function anymore. Yet, the person is still observing and storing the observations, but cannot communicate them. So during a NDE the spirit apparently leaves the body and visits for a brief period the place where the spirits of dead persons remain. He meets some of those he knew on earth. He recognizes them and they can even communicate with him. They are not asleep. He may observe a person of light, perhaps Jesus. He may have a life review, revealing his shortcomings during his life. When the reanimation is successful, the spirit returns to the body and can then communicate his experiences through the use of the revived neuronal networks.

From this we can draw some conclusions about the intermediate state. After our death, our brain stops functioning definitively. Our spirit leaves the body and moves to the abode of the dead spirits. There it remains active, learning what we need to know to prepare us for eternity life after the resurrection on the last day. Then our spirit shall be united with our resurrection body. If we then acknowledge our faith in Jesus Christ, we shall pass the final exam and enter the new kingdom. If we reject Christ at that decisive moment, we cannot enter there and will remain for ever in the absence of God, a frightful state to which the term 'hell' may well apply.

So the intermediate state is neither a period of sleep nor of punishment. Rather, it is a period of learning and preparing for the future life in joyful surroundings without the distractions and vicissitudes of earthly life. In this conviction I approach death when turning 86 in two weeks time. I hope and pray that all of you can achieve the same joyful conviction.

Amen.

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