

I have just finished watching the series finale of a wonderful television show called *The Good Place*, starring Kristen Bell and Ted Danson. It features the fellowship and adventures of a few people who die and end up in hell, but who are told that they are in heaven, the Good Place—all the better to torture them in hell. Eventually they do indeed find their way to the Good Place (i.e. to heaven), but discover that everyone there is bored and secretly miserable. That is because in heaven people can have whatever they desire simply by asking for it, and they find that such an endless succession of pleasures ultimately leads to stagnation and misery. The series should not be viewed as offering a theological statements, but as a satire on contemporary cultural mores (a kind of *The Simpsons* meets *Cheers*)—though of course it cannot completely avoid making a statement about ultimate reality. As it turns out, the Buddhists had it right, and final reality consists in returning like a wave to the undifferentiated ocean of being. Whatever. The series invites one to enjoy the ride which traces the moral growth of the central characters, and its somewhat cheeky critique of contemporary culture. I loved it.

The series also leads a Christian to reflect upon the actual nature of the Good Place. As the series has intuited, heavenly bliss cannot consist of getting one's every desire instantly fulfilled, so that if one wants a Coke one need only say the word and a Coke instantly appears in one's hand. If one supposes that the foundation upon which heaven is built is the gratification of human desire, then heaven will indeed quickly become indistinguishable from hell. Heaven is not a celestial Disneyland, "the happiest place (not) on earth", where all the earthly pleasures we desired in this life are finally indulged in the next. God is not a genie of the lamp, granting wishes. Our desires in this life do not constitute the foundation upon which heaven is built but, all too often, the problem which heaven heals. A Buddhist annihilation of human desire (the final solution of the problem offered by *The Good Place*) is not the answer, because the fact that we have desires is not the problem; our problem is that our desires have become twisted out of shape and need fixing.

We were made to be loved by God. Our eternal happiness—what makes the Good Place good—is that God is there. Heaven is not about *us*, but about *Him*. There is a God-shaped void in every heart that can only be filled by God, so that if He does not fill the void within us, we will be eternally empty and ultimately miserable. If we would only wake up, we would know that God is our true love, and finding our true love is eternal fulfilment, a love that always satisfies, but can never be satiated. St. Gregory of Nyssa said as much when he spoke of an eternal progression into joy. *The Good Place* run by Ted Danson would be of no use to us, because Jesus never made an appearance there. The philosopher Hypatia did (that darling of the anti-Christian secularists), but not the Son of God. We Christians have met Jesus, and we know that heaven is only heaven because He is there. Any lover knows this.

Heaven is not heaven because our ephemeral desires (such as for a Coke) can be instantly fulfilled, but because we will be with the Lord. Any place where Jesus can be found is heaven; any place He from which He is absent is hell. That is why St. Paul once wrote not that his desire was to depart this life and *go to heaven*, but to depart and *be with Christ* (Philippians 1:23).

Mere pleasure, the passing gratification of merely earthly desires—cannot ultimately satisfy. That is a truth that many people do not know, and we may be thankful that *The Good Place* has pointed it out to us. Heaven is not a theme park, where we can ride the roller coaster for free over and over again. That would indeed pale over time. Heaven—and the age to come—is the place where Jesus reigns, and where we can serve Him. It is about basking in the presence of Christ, seeing the face of God, standing in a place where the glory of God rolls over one's heart and fills it with joy.

It is not (as some as drearily suggested) like standing in a church service forever, for church services are not times of uninterrupted glory and joy. There are flashes of glory, of course, but for most of us they are few and irregular. One should consider church services not so much a foretaste of what will come, as a promise that something better will come. If heaven's joy may be compared with the excitement of parachuting, church services may be compared being fitted with the parachute. The fitting may have the excitement of anticipation, **Con't Pg 10**

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but the real thrill only comes after we leave the plane. So with church services: we may be blessed with anticipatory flashes of joy at Pascha, but the real joy comes after we leave this earth.

Ultimately heaven is not about finding earthly pleasures such as we might find in a theme park or fine restaurant, but about finding our true selves. We need to be changed on the inside, to become our true selves, so that heaven be will heavenly. As C.S. Lewis (that theologian of joy) once wrote, "Heaven offers nothing that a mercenary soul can desire. It is safe to tell the pure in heart that they shall see God, for only the pure in heart want to".

If Christ has not begun to change and purify our hearts so that we love God more than we love human pleasure, heaven will contain nothing that could please us. If we have begun to change on the inside so that leave behind our false selves and love God, then heaven will all that we could ever desire. For those who can say, "For me to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21), heaven will be a weight of glory beyond all comparison, for heaven will be full of Christ. In the words of St. Augustine, when we reach our goal, "We shall rest and we shall see; we shall see and we shall love; we shall love and we shall praise. Behold what will be, in the end, without end! For what is our end, but to reach that Kingdom which has no end?" That sounds like a good place indeed.

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## *Living at Home Con't*

Last Thursday, March 26<sup>th</sup>, I did an online livestream with our kids about dealing with the big changes we are dealing with in our lives due to the Coronavirus. What became apparent to me is that many of us struggle with what to do with our time, and I began to reflect on how we are called to be stewards of our time. Most of what we do has been programmed for us. We go to work, go to school, go to church, sing in a choir, play a sport, play an instrument, and so forth. Now many of our families are faced with ordering our lives without these "programmed choices" being available to us. Things are not being provided for us, and we are now asked: How are we going to manage the time given to us?

The two readings from Psalm 90 and Ephesians 5 call upon us to consider the following:

When we are young, time seems to move so slowly, but as we age, the days "quickly pass, and we fly away." To know the "power of Your (God's) anger" is to rediscover that when God speaks, we need to take him seriously and listen. It is easy in times of wealth and plenty not to take God seriously and say, "I will deal with God later," taking it for granted that there will be a later. So if we learn to "number our days" in order "to gain heart of wisdom," we might not find it as difficult to do what we need to do with the time on our hands.

To "redeem the time" and to understand "what the will of the Lord is" means using the time to learn what God wants me to do and then do it. This is how we redeem time. We seek to do those things that please God. But before we can do that, we need to come to know God Himself through a relationship of prayer and reading His Word as revealed in the Bible, in the Tradition of our Church, and in the lives of the Saints. Some of this we already know, but now we are given an opportunity to do this for a short time in a way we never imagined before.

So, in addition to doing our schoolwork from home, we spend our daily time saying our prayers, reading the Bible, reading the life of the daily saint. Through this consistent practice, we will come to know what the "will of the Lord is." We enjoy our meals as a family, and as we give thanks, the Crucified and Risen Lord will come into our midst to visit us. Families can even have some fun together. Break out the table games you have in the closet that have been gathering dust, and play together. I saw a posting on Facebook of a priest and his family playing the game "Catan" (never heard of it). I thought it was great. I think what will come out of the difficult situation of this virus will be a greater appreciation for what we do have. God the Father will somehow use this tragedy to help us grow closer to Him, through His Son Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. The blessing of the Lord be upon you.

With love in Christ,  
The unworthy +Paul