

Homily for parishes and people

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday 25th May 2025, Easter 6

Readings: **Acts 16:9-15**

Revelation 21:10-14, 21:22-22:5

Psalm 67

John 14:23-29

It's remarkable how often we use statistics to get a sense of a person or a situation. When joining a gym, or applying for insurance, we have to share some personal statistics which can include when we were born; what our gender is; what our height and current weight is; and where we live. It's a bit two dimensional, but with this information organisations can search on Google to find a photo of us, and the GPS coordinates of our home!

However, this information does not tell the organisation about the intangibles of us – which I think of as 'personhood'. They do not indicate what we like to eat, and what makes us laugh? They do not indicate who we love, and what we enjoy doing more than anything else? They do not indicate what values we have, or what our story is?

With these things in mind, I'd like to talk about the ongoing war in Gaza. Here are some surprising statistics: The Gaza Strip is forty-one kilometers long and its width varies from six to twelve kilometers. This means that it has a total land area of three hundred and sixty-five square kilometers, which is a much smaller land area than some of our western parishes! Indeed, the Western Region of our Diocese is one thousand three hundred and fifty-six times bigger than the Gaza Strip! Yet, in December 2024, this relatively small area of land was home to 2.1 million people.

On the 7th October 2023, the militant organisation called Hamas, launched coordinated attacks from the Gaza Strip into Southern Israel, killing one thousand and ninety five people, and taking two hundred and forty civilians hostage. This was the most deadly attack against Jewish people since the Holocaust of Europe, the 1930's and 40's which killed more than six million Jews.

Since that attack nineteen months ago the Israel Defence Forces has killed at least fifty-three thousand, five hundred and twenty-eight Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. However, these statistics do not include those who have died due to 'health service disruption', inadequate water and sanitation, and lack of food. Looking in from outside, it does seem that the stated Israeli policy of eradicating Hamas from Gaza, could be interpreted as eradicating every living Palestinian from Gaza.

The statistics are appalling but unless there is some imagination we can distance the statistics from the personhood of Palestinian people. Women and men, girls and boys, and babies... who like us, want to live.

I wrote a series of poems last year to try and touch base with the humanity behind the statistics and share part of one here:

*“Where is your home, Mohammad,
filled with the smell of your mother’s cinnamon,
and your sister’s easy laughter?
Where the gentle eyes of your father,
or the olive trees he tended?
Where the place of prayer,
or the uncles, brothers, and nephews
who met there?*

*All gone...
to bloody rubble, dust, and graves.*

*Where is the market, Rana,
filled with chickpeas, coriander,
and the chatter of community?
Where the wise counsel of aunts,
or the marzipan they made?
Where are the pomegranate trees,
schools, and sweet tea?*

*All gone...
to bloody rubble, dust, and graves...*

because a neighbour... has gone mad...”

Is it too much to suggest that what many have experienced, and continue to experience, in Gaza is a form of hell on earth? And, if we accept that, what do we mean when we say, ‘Hell’? What do we imagine when we say, ‘Heaven’?

When I hear those words I often think of Michelangelo’s ‘*Last Judgement*’ painting in the Sistine Chapel of St Peter’s in Rome. The feet of God are high, seated on a throne beyond the clouds; while a muscular Jesus is standing as judge sending some souls up, and some down; while an army of demons are doing terrible things to those descending... to hell.

As ancient people looked at light shafting through clouds, they understandably concluded that gods lived on the other side of those same clouds. So, mountains sometimes covered with cloud, were expected to be places of divine encounter. In our faith we can helpfully remember Moses receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, or Jesus transfigured before his friends on an unknown, and high mountain.

Similarly, when ancient people saw lava bubbling up from the ground, and witnessed volcanic eruptions, it is not hard to understand why they imagined 'hell' as a fiery place of death and torment below the surface of earth.

However, centuries of scientific work have helped us understand the world very differently to those ancient people. For we have drilled deep into the earth and have scanned through to the planet's molten core without finding any demons.

We also know that the heaven Michelangelo imagined was not found when astronauts first went into space. They did not find the throne room of God, described by the religious imagination of ancient people, but instead found the vastness of space.

So, if we agree that heaven is not a geographical place – how do we understand it?

My hunch is that we could begin by using the language of relationship and love. That maybe part of experiencing 'heaven' is to be in good relationship with God and with other people. Which means that much of 'hell' would be the antithesis of this. In the light of your experience and reading, I wonder how you would define 'heaven' and 'hell'?

Some people think that the purpose of Christian faith is to ensure that believers get to a place called 'heaven' after we die. Further, that faith in Jesus is the only certain way to get to this place. Remember Paul's words in his letter to the Romans: *'...if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.'* (Romans 10:9). Presumably saved... from 'hell'?

But, when Jesus is remembered talking about what happens after we die, he used a different framework! In the twenty fifth chapter of Matthew, Jesus is remembered saying that that the people of all nations would not be judged on the basis of their belief or baptism, but rather by the way they responded to human need. If there had been a compassionate and practical response to those who were hungry, thirsty, naked, sick, imprisoned, or strange... people would find God's approval – surely 'heaven'? But, if there was an inadequate response... there would be eternal punishment? (Matthew 25:31-46).

Yet, if we think that Christian faith is simply an insurance policy for what might happen after death, I think we're missing something vital.

I love the verse in John's Gospel which remembers Jesus saying that he came for people to *'have life and have it abundantly.'* (John 10:10). This suggests that in this life, not just what happens after this life, we can find love, purpose, and peace through Christ and God's Spirit. We can get glimpses of 'heaven' right here when we are known, deeply loved, and in tune somehow... with the God who makes everything possible.

The opening verses of today's Psalm (Psalm 67) speak from this place of being centred in God, and expresses the desire for God to bless ALL people. The first verse asks, *"May God be gracious to us and bless us: and make his face to shine upon us..."* and this opening is pretty-inward looking but it doesn't stop there!

For the Psalm continues, *"That your ways may be known on earth: your liberating power among ALL nations."* We ask to be blessed by God, not just for our own good, but so that we can be a blessing to others, and that our lives can give witness to the faith we have.

The third verse then suggests that God-centred living gives a peace that nothing else can and it longs for this to be known, *"Let the peoples praise you, O God; let ALL the peoples praise you."*

In our living this week, let us seek to be similarly God centred in the things we choose to do and say. May we be generous and compassionate in the way we live, and in God's grace may there be compassion and generosity and peace, for the people of Gaza.

Would you please join me as we close in prayer:

God of grace and love, we give thanks for the mystery and gift of our lives and ask for your blessing on ALL the peoples of the world. In particular, we ask for peace for the people who live in the Palestinian Territories and the people who live in the State of Israel. We ask in the name of the one who said, 'Love your neighbour', Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.