

We have all at one time or another seen the headlines in one of the newspapers at the checkout stand at the grocery store that tell us that this one or that one has gone to heaven and returned to tell us all about it. We have seen the images of heaven with streets of gold, harps playing and the pearly gates. These are wonderful images but not reality. They make for a good cartoon or a movie set. But what does heaven mean to us as Catholic Christians?

At the funeral liturgy of our loved ones we hear about hope and being in a better place. We are comforted in the fact that our loved one will not be suffering from the maladies that afflicted them while on earth, that they are at peace. We are sad at the passing of this person that was such an integral part of our life but we do believe that he or she is now with our God in the place that Jesus said he would prepare for us. We celebrate this belief each year when we celebrate the great feast of Easter. We do understand this concept but we still wonder what is heaven and what is it like?

Since we have no definitive answer to this question we can only make an educated guess as to what heaven will be like. When looking at the stories in Scripture of the Resurrection of Jesus we have no story of an actual witness to the actual event. The only stories that we have are of the discovery of the empty tomb. We hear stories of Jesus appearing in a locked room and walking the road talking about the fulfillment of the old prophecies. We really do not know what kind of body this risen body of Jesus looked like. St. Paul tells us that the raised body is a spiritual body and that it is imperishable. He also tells us that it is a mystery. The body that we have now will be changed. The one thing that is constant in all the references in Scripture is that we will be with our God because he loves us so much that He wants all of us to be with Him. He loves us regardless of our faults and misdeeds. We only need to strive to do better and ask for forgiveness. It is hard for many of us to understand this unconditional love.

For me personally when I think of heaven I think of a place of peace and tranquility. Heaven is a place where I will finally understand all the questions that I had in life and will come to know God as I have never known him before. I also believe that I will be reunited with those people who have been important in my life and I have lost. If I could choose the body for my life in heaven I would like one a little taller and a little thinner but I also understand that the body that I have in heaven may have a completely different makeup and consistency than the one on earth. I have faith that whatever type of body I have or what heaven is really like it will be the best for me. Heaven may be a different thing for different people. As St. Paul reminded his readers it is a mystery. I know that I cannot earn heaven by good deeds because it is a gift freely given from a loving God. My responsibility is to live my life to the best of my ability using the guidelines that Jesus left us before he went home to prepare that place for us.

As we go into the Advent season and start all the preparations for the Christmas holiday let us remember that Christmas is more than just the birthday of Jesus. It is the time that we remember that God so loved us that he sent his Son to us to help us understand that love. Our human nature is so precious that His Son shared that with us giving our human nature a dignity that should never be forgotten.