

Advent lectures: Westminster Abbey 2009

Dante and the Human Journey

1. Hell: 'All Hope Abandon, Ye who Enter Here'

Introduction

Recently Bill Bryson published his immensely popular *Short History of Nearly Everything*.¹ There's quite a bit in the book to remind us of Dante. Bryson's first section is entitled 'Lost in the Cosmos, and his last 'The Road to Us'. At the end of his hugely entertaining and readable cosmology, which takes the reader from the origins of the cosmos to the predicament of contemporary humanity, he concludes by saying 'We (that is human beings) have been chosen by fate or providence or whatever you wish to call it. As far as we can tell, we are the best there is. We may be all there is. It's an unnerving thought that we may be the living universe's supreme achievement and its worst nightmare simultaneously.'² Virtually his last words are, 'We really are at the very beginning of it all. The trick, of course, is to make sure we never find the end. And that, almost certainly, will require a lot more than lucky breaks.'³

Bryson makes no pretence to originality. His book is the result of three years getting up to speed with contemporary scientific thought, and in that sense is representative of views widely held today. In several respects we can see links with Dante. Dante starts by telling us he had lost his way, and goes on to claim that the whole 'human family' has lost its way in the cosmos. Included in his cosmology is an account of 'The Road to Us', but Dante is much more interested in 'The Road for Us': what is the right road for human beings to take? Dante shares the sense that human beings have been chosen to play a particular role in the drama of Everything, but he is clear that we are neither the *best that is* nor *all that is* (I presume Bryson means by 'all that is' the only beings in the universe able to reflect on their own existence). Dante would have no hesitation in accepting that human beings are indeed the living universe's supreme achievement and its worst nightmare simultaneously. He would, however, see no reason to assert that 'we really are at the very beginning of it all' (Bryson offers no reason either), nor would he accept that 'the trick is to make sure that we never find the end'. He would take 'the end' in a double sense: he would maintain that the point of existence is precisely to find the end, the purpose (*telos*) of being human, and would say finding *that* is what makes sense of being human and brings us to that end, to the completion of our journey. The idea that we should actively apply ourselves to *never* finding the end would, for Dante, be the very thing that indicated we have indeed lost our way and need to be rescued.

Dante would, I think, be amazed that Bryson could write a book entitled *A Short History of Nearly Everything* and make just one mention of 'fate, or providence or whatever you wish to call it'; that he could make no mention of the great classical

¹ First published, 2003; page numbers refer to Black Swan edition (London, 2004).

² *Short History*, p. 572.

³ *Short History*, p. 574.

civilisations, with their historians, poets and thinkers; that he could ignore the worlds of politics and religion, literature and ethics, and, perhaps above all, that he could make no mention of *love* and still call this *A Short History of Nearly Everything*. I think he would be amazed by the extent to which modern human beings have become lost in a dark wood and have lost the ability to be guided by the ancient wisdom, which he symbolised by the light of the stars and the sun, which for him had such a powerful mythic and religious significance. For Dante, *human life is a journey*, and the point of being human is to make sure we journey in the right direction, the direction to which we are called deep within our hearts, so that we come safely to that fulfilment for which we are intended. If we can find the right direction, and safely reach that fulfilment, life can be seen as *Commedia* (in the sense that it has a happy ending); if we miss the point and do not attain to that end, our human situation is one of *Tragedy*.

1. The lost path

Dante begins by telling us about the most famous mid-life crisis in all literature. His great three-part poem begins ‘in the middle of the journey of our life’, in Holy Week, 1300, when he is 35. We might notice in passing that he speaks about ‘our life’, not ‘my life’: in his very first words he associates his readers, you and me, with what he is saying. The great journey he is about to undertake is a journey which explores the human condition, not just his own *curriculum vitae*.

Dante tells us he had lost ‘the right way’ (*‘la diritta via era smarrita’*). ‘*Diritta*’, can mean ‘straight’ or ‘right’. It is a keyword throughout the *Commedia*. Dante is borrowing an idea that is familiar from the Scriptures: ‘There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.’ (Prov 14:12). The psalmist prays: ‘Teach me thy way, O Lord; and lead me on a level path (*‘in semitam rectam’* LXX) because of my enemies’ (Ps 27:11). Dante was lost in a dark wood and could see the *right* way forward, the way straight ahead: he had lost the guiding light that comes from the sun and the stars. A few lines further on, as he comes to the foot of a nearby hill, we are reminded that the sun’s rays give light to see the right path:

Upward I looked, and I beheld its [*the hill’s*] shoulders
Vested already with that planet's rays
Which leadeth others right (*dritto*) by every road.⁴

We are not told exactly how Dante came to lose his way, but immediately after this introduction, as he tries to climb the hill, his path is blocked, successively, by a leopard, representing worldly pleasure, a lion representing violence, and a wolf representing avarice. These three animals seem to be images of sins of which he accuses himself (worldly pleasure, violence and avarice), the dangers of which he is

⁴ *guardai in alto, e vidi le sue spalle
vestite già de' raggi del pianeta
che mena dritto altrui per ogne calle.*

(I have used the translation of the *Divine Comedy* by Henry W. Longfellow unless otherwise indicated, though I have sometimes modernised archaisms and made other emendations.)

to learn in vivid detail as he journeys through hell. However, there is a further clue as to what had gone wrong in his life: in the *Purgatorio*, Beatrice says:

When from the flesh to spirit I ascended,
And beauty and virtue were in me increased,
I was to him less dear and less delightful;
And into ways untrue (*'per via non vera'*) he turned his steps,
Pursuing the false images of good,
That never any promises fulfil;
Nor prayer for inspiration me availed,
By means of which in dreams and otherwise
I called him back, so little did he heed them.
So low he fell, that all appliances
For his salvation were already short,
*Save showing him the people of perdition.*⁵

What the 'false images of good' that Dante pursued were we are not told, but if Beatrice, once she died, was to Dante 'less dear and less delightful,' it may be that before her death at the age of 24 Dante had committed himself to her in some sort of 'spiritual marriage', but, now that she has left the earth, he prefers the pleasures of a bodily relationship with his wife Gemma Dorati, whom he married before Beatrice's death. If he had in some way pledged himself previously to Beatrice, this could well in his time have been seen as choosing 'a false image of good'.

Dante's need for the way which is '*dritto*' (straight, right, direct) is, then, the need of every human being. When he climbs Mount Purgatory, he speaks of the arduous ascent,

Ascending and still circling round the mount
That you doth straighten (*drizza*), whom the world made crooked.⁷

The 'you' (*voi*) of which he speaks here once more associates his readers, you and me, with the journey he is making. The ascent of Mount Purgatory, to which we shall come next week, though it is one of 'ascending and circling' actually straightens you out. One thinks of the prophecy of Isaiah, quoted by John the Baptist and familiar

⁵ *Quando di carne a spirto era salita
e bellezza e virtù cresciuta m'era,
fu' io a lui men cara e men gradita;
e valse i passi suoi per via non vera,
imagini di ben seguendo false,
che nulla promession rendono intera.
Né l'impetrare ispirazion mi valse,
con le quali e in sogno e altrimenti
lo rivocai; sì poco a lui ne calse!
Tanto giù cadde, che tutti argomenti
a la salute sua eran già corti,
fuor che mostrarli le perdute genti.* (Purg. XXX.127-38)

⁶ Dante had four children with his wife Gemma Dorati, whom he married before Beatrice's death.

⁷ *salendo e rigirando la montagna
che drizza voi che 'l mondo fece torti.* (Purg. XXIII.125-6)

from the Messiah: ‘the crooked shall be made straight’ (Is 40:3) - which Dante would have known as ‘*erunt prava* [cf. the ‘depraved’] *in directa* [cf. ‘*dritti*’]’. When he talks of the ascent which straightens you out after the world has screwed you up, he is alluding to Isaiah.⁸

And then, later on again, he speaks in similar terms about God’s will:

Free and upright (*dritto*) and sound is thy will,
And error were it not to do its bidding;⁹

By this stage in *Purgatorio* he is very ready to acknowledge that his mistake, the mistake which caused him to lose his way, was not to do God’s bidding. For him, all human beings need to be led in the right path, and the primary instruments by which God shows us that path are the light of reason, symbolised by the heavenly light of the stars and of the sun (to which we shall come in the third lecture), and the soul’s desire, which must be educated. We have to learn to apply in the right direction our desire for the good and to avoid committing themselves to those things which *seem* to offer good, but in fact lead you off the path and, if unchecked, eventually to hell.

In Dante’s world, this sense of the right path, from which we all too easily wander, is reflected in the whole cosmos. We human beings are not alone in our need to keep to the path that God has allocated for us. The ‘planets’ means ‘the wandering ones’, because unlike the stars they wander through the sky. The very planets have to keep to the right way, the way that God has allocated for them, or chaos will ensue. All created things, planets and stars, human beings and animals, have their place in the grand scheme of things, and the path that they must follow. When Dante confesses his faith to Peter it is in terms of God, the ‘unmoved mover’, the one fixed point in the universe who guides the movement of everything else through the power of love and desire:

... In one God I believe,
Sole and etern[al], who moveth all the heavens
With love and with desire, himself unmoved.¹⁰

⁸ I am struck by the way in which Is 35 suggests themes touched on at the opening of the *Commedia*. Had this passage, I wonder, lodged in Dante’s imagination:

A highway shall be there,
and it shall be called the Holy Way;
the unclean shall not travel on it,
but it shall be for God’s people;
no traveller, not even fools, shall go astray.
No lion shall be there,
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;
they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there. (Is 35:8-9)

⁹ *libero, dritto e sano è tuo arbitrio, e fallo fora non fare a suo senno:* (Purg. XXVII.140-1, Longfellow translation adapted.)

¹⁰ *E io rispondo: Io credo in uno Dio solo ed eterno, che tutto 'l ciel move, non moto, con amore e con disio;* (Par XXIV: 130)

The problem for human beings, who have free will, is that our love and our desire so easily lead us astray. If we let ourselves be moved by God to follow in the right path, we can learn to love his will, and our desire for God's path can be educated so that it becomes stronger, but our love and our desire is chaotic. It is easily misplaced: misplaced love and mis-placed desire lead us astray, like planets that wander out of their orbits. When we wander off the path we have to be guided (how fortunate we are if we have a good guide) and prodded (how fortunate we are if we are brought up short) back onto the way that has been set for us.

Speaking of the lost path, it is perhaps helpful to remember that Dante's poetry, like that of some of the best-known Psalms and prophetic writings, is that of an exile. Like the Israelites, banished from Jerusalem to become exiles in Babylon, Dante was banished from Florence never to return. He became a wanderer on the face of the earth, moving from city to city, never losing his sense of being a true Florentine, never losing his love of Florence and his distress at what had become of his beloved city. His is a poetry of enchantment and condemnation. In his poetry he recaptures moments of joy, like his meeting with Beatrice, with whom he instantly fell in love, though she was only a child. But in his *Commedia*, there is a strand of real bitterness, a sharp desire to settle old political scores. He castigates the cities of Italy, especially Florence, because they have become corrupt and declined from their former glory. It is not only Dante who lost his way, but Florence, the cities of Italy, the papacy and the Empire, and also religious orders like the Benedictines, Dominicans and Franciscans. Dante is constantly calling them back to their first love ('*primo amore*'), the 'primal love' from which they have wandered. Dante's great poem is written to recall not only himself, but all who read it, including you and me, to the right path.

2. Vergil as his guide

In the very first Canto, Vergil suddenly appears, presenting himself as Dante's guide. When Dante is confronted by the leopard, the lion and the she-wolf that will not give way, Vergil is there to lead him by a path he could not possibly have anticipated. Vergil is going to take him through the '*inferno*' (the word simply means 'underworld', and does not necessarily mean a place of fire; in fact, the deepest pit of hell is a place of freezing cold). The underworld is a place that Vergil knows well because he was the author of the *Aeneid*, the great poetic epic which told of the destruction of Troy, the wanderings of Aeneas and the eventual founding of the city of Rome. In particular, Vergil gave a book of his great work to describing how his hero, Aeneas, led by the Sybil, went to the underworld to visit his father and learn about the future of Rome. Vergil was borrowing from Homer, and Dante borrows from Vergil. Immediately, he meets Vergil, Dante recognises and greets the man he acknowledges as the senior poet:

Thou art my master, and my author thou,
Thou art alone the one from whom I took
The beautiful style that has done honour to me.¹¹

¹¹ *Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore;
tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi
lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore.* (Inferno I.85-6)

Vergil is both in a literary and moral sense Dante's guide. In Dante's time, he was seen as one of those classical writers who pointed to the coming of Christ, who was nearly Christian but not quite. In his poem, Dante has to cobble up a reason why Vergil is excluded from Paradise. Vergil can lead him through the underworld and through Purgatory as far as the earthly Paradise, but at that point he has to give way to Dante's heavenly guide, to Beatrice. Throughout the first two books of the *Commedia* Vergil is Dante's guide, companion and friend. He is a father-figure, to whom Dante expresses his emotional reactions, his sorrow, pity and fear, as he sees and hears the torments of hell. Again and again, Vergil knows what to do next, which way they should go. It is he who leads Dante through the darkness towards the light, though he is not himself permitted to experience the fullness of that light. Dante makes of him an almost-Christian, whose whole work, whose whole moral vision, is to be taken as trustworthy, as illuminating. He thus classes him with Aristotle, ('the master of those who know, *'il maestro di color che sanno'*),¹² Aristotle of whom he says, 'All gaze upon him, and all do him honour'. Following the example of Thomas Aquinas, who wove together the philosophy of Aristotle with Christian theology, Dante weaves together the alarming moral vision of Vergil with Christian teaching. Not only does he call him *'maestro'* but also *'duce'* (*duce* is 'leader' – one can see why Mussolini was keen to present himself in that light). *'Tu duca, tu signore, e tu maestro'* ('You are guide, you are lord, you are master'¹³, he says to Vergil. Confidently he entrusts himself to Vergil's leading. He is prepared, literally, to let Vergil lead him through hell and out the other side.

3. Shock therapy

There is one major way, I think, in which we tend to misunderstand Dante. We tend to think he is interested in giving us a peep into the future, showing us what comes after death. Undoubtedly there is an element of that: in the poem, Dante travels where no other living human being is permitted to go. However, it is striking that Dante shows little interest in what will happen *at the end of time*, in the traditional imagery of the Son of Man coming in the clouds, in great power and glory. There are frequent references throughout the poem to the position of the sun and the stars, so we know his journey takes place in Holy Week and Easter 1300. What he is showing us is the eternal context of the drama of God's love, the eternal context of those events on earth which determine the meaning of our lives. His real interest, it seems to me, is this life, but this life re-imagined in the light of eternity. He wants us to see sin for what it is (destructive and fearsome), the path of virtue for what that is (narrow but secure), and the hope of eternity for what that is (the power of love which draws us on) – and he wants us to be changed by that vision. His journey through hell, purgatory and heaven bathes our human journey in fresh light.

The first major challenge for Dante is to pass through the portals of hell. The words on the gates are well known :

Through me the way is to the [sorrowful] city;
Through me the way is to eternal sorrow;
Through me the way among the people lost.

¹² Inferno IV.131.

¹³ Inferno II. 140.

Justice incited my sublime Creator;
 Created me divine Omnipotence,
 The highest Wisdom and the primal Love.
 Before me there were no created things,
 Only etern[al], and I eternal last.
 All hope abandon, ye who enter here !¹⁴

In the first three lines, we are triply reminded that this is the only way to enter hell: 'You go through me': '*Per me si va*'. Other than Dante, no living human being ever makes this journey of their own accord. At this stage of their human journey, immediately after death, the path is determined for them: this is the way to the sorrowful city, to eternal sorrow, the way taken by lost people. Dante had been lost in the dark wood, but, thanks to Vergil his guide, he is not, as he enters hell, lost. He will see the lost people but by the grace of God (symbolised by the intervention of Beatrice on his behalf) he will not, if he takes this strange path, himself be lost.

Amongst the lines inscribed on the portal of hell, the next three are particularly difficult. Their challenge reverberates throughout the *Commedia*: 'Justice incited my sublime Creator; I was created by divine Omnipotence, the highest Wisdom and the primal Love.' On the gate is also written: 'Before me there were no created things', which is pretty well a direct quote from the Book of Proverbs, where Wisdom speaks: 'The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old' (Proverbs 8:22). Dante transposes the reference to Wisdom to make Wisdom the Creator, not the Creation. The effect is to raise the question even more strongly: how could 'the divine Omnipotence, the highest wisdom and the primal Love' create *as their first creation*, and *inspired by justice*, the portal of Hell. I don't think Dante ever resolves this question. For him, justice, a topic to which he frequently returns, and wisdom consist in acknowledging the ways of God and accepting them - in the end without question. The whole point of Dante's journey is that he should be brought to accept and embrace the ways of God: we can at least see that 'the primal love' is reaching out to him by drawing him on through this journey, which is a kind of shock therapy to bring him morally to his senses and to create a way out of the crisis that has overtaken him. This is why the famous last line written on the portals of hell - 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here' - does not apply to him.

In passing, let me say that I cannot but read these lines of Dante without thinking of Auschwitz, with its gate on which was written '*Arbeit macht frei*'. Auchwitz was a living hell, and it was a lie to say that any could find freedom in or through the forced labour there. Many could find no hope: they felt themselves lost among the dark woods of Poland, but there were others, like Primo Levi, Maximilian Kolbe and Mother Maria Pilenko, who somehow managed to keep hope alive. The Christian

¹⁴ *Per me si va ne la città dolente,
 per me si va ne l'eterno dolore,
 per me si va tra la perduta gente.
 Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore:
 fecemì la divina podestate,
 la somma sapienza e 'l primo amore.
 Dinanzi a me non fuor cose create
 se non eterne, e io eterno duro.
 Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate".* (Inferno III.1-9, translation amended)

hope that reaches to the very depths of the most hellish human experience is symbolised by the harrowing of hell, Christ's triumphant breaking down of the gate of hell after the victory of the cross to let out the souls imprisoned there. Dante knows of this legend. Vergil tells him:

"I was a novice in this state,
When I saw hither come a Mighty One,
With sign of victory incoronate.
Hence he drew forth the shade of the First Parent,
And that of his son Abel, and of Noah,
Of Moses the lawgiver, and the obedient
Abraham, patriarch, and David, king,
Israel with his father and his children,
And Rachel, for whose sake he did so much,
And others many, and he made them blessed;
And thou must know, that earlier than these
Never were any human spirits saved."¹⁵

When Dante and Vergil arrive, the blessed souls released by Christ have gone from hell. Those who are left, whose number grows continually, are those who have no hope of ever being released. In the hell through which he passes, Dante is the one person who has that defining human quality. Even Vergil in the end is denied the hope of heaven. We are told that 'that Emperor, who reigns above, in that I was rebellious to his law, wills that through me (that is through my teaching) none come into his city'.¹⁶ This presumably includes Vergil himself: though there are fragments of good teaching in his poetry, in the end it does not lead to Christ and Vergil, of course, was never baptized. Even Vergil lacks the hope that he will eventually come to the Celestial City. Dante, however, never abandons that hope and as he journeys on it becomes ever stronger. In the *Paradiso*, he defines the nature of hope by quoting the Epistle to the Hebrews:

"Hope," said I, "is the certain expectation
Of future glory, which is the effect
Of grace divine and merit precedent."¹⁷

¹⁵ *«Io era nuovo in questo stato,
quando ci vidi venire un possente,
con segno di vittoria coronato.
Trasseci l'ombra del primo parente,
d'Abèl suo figlio e quella di Noè,
di Moisè legista e ubidente;
Abraàm patriarca e David re,
Israèl con lo padre e co' suoi nati
e con Rachele, per cui tanto fé;
e altri molti, e fecegli beati.
E vo' che sappi che, dinanzi ad essi,
spiriti umani non eran salvati».* (Inferno IV.52-62)

¹⁶ *ché quello imperador che là sù regna,
perch'i' fu' ribellante a la sua legge,
non vuol che 'n sua città per me si vegna.* (Inferno 124-6)

¹⁷ *«Speme», diss'io, «è uno attender certo
de la gloria futura, il qual produce
grazia divina e precedente merito.* (Paradiso XXV.67-9)

Nobody left in hell has ‘the certain expectation of future glory’. By describing this in his poem, Dante gives vivid warning that it a terrible thing to have no hope - something which applies not only after this life but in *this life* as well.

The journey through *Inferno* strikes me as rather like a trip through Madame Tussauds, or perhaps (somewhere I have never wanted to go) through the London Dungeon. It consists in a number of scenes, through which Vergil and Dante move successively, descending ever deeper in the circles of hell. What remains in the mind are *tableaux*, where Dante meets characters he has known personally in this life, or known of, so that their present predicament distresses him greatly. But before creating these *tableaux* in the ever-deepening circles of hell, Dante assaults our ears with the cries of the morally unawakened, who are neither fully in hell nor out of it. The sounds he describes at each stage of his journey are extremely significant for the effects he wishes to create: in purgatory and in paradise they are frequently taken from the liturgy. In hell is no liturgy, no singing, no praise, but:

There sighs, complaints, and ululations loud
Resounded through the air without a star,
Whence I, at the beginning, wept thereat.
Languages diverse, horrible dialects,
Accents of anger, words of agony,
And voices high and hoarse, with sound of hands,
Made up a tumult that goes whirling on
For ever in that air.¹⁸

Dante has first to cross the river Acheron, carried across by the boatman Charon. On the other side he is in Limbo, which is the first circle (*cerchio*) of hell, where there are good people who were never baptized. Here he finds poets like himself: Homer, Horace, Ovid and Lucan, philosophers and other great writers of classical antiquity. From here, he descends to the second circle of hell, where Minos, the guardian, assigns to the damned their place in the circles below. In this second circle there are lovers who submitted their reason to desire (V.39). The third circle, where there falls an ‘eternal, accursed, cold, and heavy rain,’ (VI.8) is guarded by Cerberus, the terrifying dog with three heads. Here the gluttonous are punished. The fourth circle, which is defended by the wolf Pluto, contains the prodigal (the over-generous) and the avaricious, amongst whom are many clergy. The fifth circle is the marsh created by the river Styx, where the wrathful are steeped in black mud. Circles two to five contain those whose sin is a form of incontinent worldly pleasure (which has been symbolised by the leopard that barred Dante’s way).

¹⁸*Quivi sospiri, pianti e alti guai
risonavan per l'aere senza stelle,
per ch'io al cominciar ne lagrimai.
Diverse lingue, orribili favelle,
parole di dolore, accenti d'ira,
voci alte e fioche, e suon di man con elle
facevano un tumulto, il qual s'aggira
sempre in quell'aura senza tempo tinta,
come la rena quando turbo spira.* (Inferno III.22-30)

Dante and Vergil cross the river Styx with the help of the ferryman Phlegyas, who carries them to the entrance of the city of Dis. Here their way is barred by the Furies and by thousands of fallen angels. After a terrible confrontation, they are rescued by a messenger from heaven (IX .9-105), who opens the way for them to the City of Dis. Here they find the tombs of the heretics. Then they descend further to the seventh circle, which contains all those guilty of violence (the sins represented by the lion). Here there are those who have been violent against themselves (the suicides), who have been violent against others (murderers), and who have been violent against God and nature (sodomites and usurers). This is where Dante meets Brunetto Latini, a Florentine of the older generation who twice addresses him as 'son' and for whom he clearly has immense respect and affection (XV). However, for all the nobility and inspiration Dante finds in Brunetto's writing, and the 'kind, paternal image' (83) he has of him, in the poem he is condemned for his sin to remain eternally in hell.

On the edge of a further abyss, Dante unlooses a cord which he has been carrying in the hope of catching the leopard. This attracts the flying monster Geryon, on whose back he and Vergil spiral down in a terrifying descent to the eighth circle, that of Malebolge, which has ten divisions for different kind of fraud. This is the realm of the sins symbolised by the she-wolf, who represents avarice. Here he encounters panders and seducers, scourged by demons; flatterers sunk in excrement; simoniacs who have traded the holy things of God for money (Dante names three popes, including Boniface VIII, who was still reigning in 1303, three years after the supposed date of this encounter); diviners, with their faces turned to be above their backs, down which their tears run. In this place Dante has to learn that his natural pity is misplaced. When he begins to weep, Vergil rebukes him:

Who is a greater reprobate than he
Who feels compassion at the doom (*giudicio*) divine?¹⁹

Next he comes on barrators, 'barterers' who succumbed to bribery and are now covered with stinking pitch; then hypocrites, who wear cloaks which are gilded outwardly, but within are made of lead (XXIII.64). Now Vergil and Dante see thieves, who are tormented with snakes. Here also are false counsellors (XXVI) who are swathed in flame. And now comes the first sight of Mount Purgatory. At the bottom point of hell, there is the possibility of beginning the ascent towards the light. But first Dante describes the lowest point in Malebolge, where the falsifiers – those who have been false in deed and word – are confined.

Dante and Vergil now dimly discern the figures of huge giants standing around the central pit and ninth circle of hell. One of the giants Antaeus, lifts them and places them right in the lowest pit of hell, Cocytus, where all is freezing. Here Dante come across some of his own particular enemies whom he sees as traitors to Florence: he finds himself trampling on the face of Bocca degli Abbati (XXXII. 78). Here he settles some old scores with Pisa and Genoa. Then, in the last Canto of the *Inferno*, he and Vergil encounter Satan, ('The emperor of the dolorous kingdom', '*Lo imperador del doloroso regno*') half frozen into the ice (XXXIV. 28), chomping with

¹⁹ *Qui vive la pietà quand'è ben morta;
chi è più scellerato che colui
che al giudicio divin passion comporta?* (Inferno XX 28)

his three mouths on Judas Iscariot, Brutus and Cassius. As they behold Satan, Vergil calls on Dante to hold on tight as he climbs down Satan's body. They have now passed the mid-point of the earth and begin once more to ascend towards the light:

The Guide and I into that hidden road
 Now entered, to return to the bright world;
 And without care of having any rest
 We mounted up, he first and I the second,
 Till I beheld through a round aperture
 Some of the beauteous things that Heaven doth bear;

Thence we came forth to rebehold the stars.²⁰

Vergil has brought Dante safely through the most terrifying and dangerous part of their journey. The last lines of the Canto simply reiterate a few central themes: Vergil has been a faithful guide to bring Dante through the darkness back into the 'bright world'. The two of them emerge into the light to behold the beauty of heaven and once more to see the light of the stars by which they will be guided as they journey on, until they emerge into the full light of the sun. At this point of immense promise they are ready to ascend Mount Purgatory.

And our journey?

Dante does not spell out the meaning of all this for you and me, his readers today. What I have tried to suggest in this lecture is that *his* journey is intended to be a journey that *involves and educates his readers*, and, in the case of the *Inferno*, that shocks us into a reconsideration of the misguided path we may be following in our own lives. There are aspects of his theology and his morality that no doubt will be difficult for us, perhaps especially the idea that we simply have to accept the condemnation of any human being to an eternity of suffering and that this could be a manifestation of 'Giustizia' of 'la somma Sapienza' and of 'il primo Amore'. But there is evidence Dante himself was troubled by the idea. Less attractive to us is his way of settling scores with his enemies by placing them in the lowest circle of hell, and gloating over their imagined discomfiture. On the whole, though, what attracts us to him as he journeys on is his ready compassion, his sorrows at the sins of humanity (especially his own humanity), and his own willingness to seek the *right* way, guided by his '*maestro*'.

Dante's journey puts me in mind of a simple prayer that has become popular in recent years. I find it particularly striking that this prayer is not from a Christian but a Hindu background: it expresses an aspiration that is not necessarily tied to Christianity but nevertheless fits well with the universe that Dante inhabits. As it is completely non-

²⁰ *Lo duca e io per quel cammino ascoso
 intrammo a ritornar nel chiaro mondo;
 e sanza cura aver d'alcun riposo,
 salimmo sù, el primo e io secondo,
 tanto ch'i' vidi de le cose belle
 che porta 'l ciel, per un pertugio tondo.
 E quindi uscimmo a riveder le stelle.* (Inferno XXXIV. 133-9)

specific about cosmology, it may also fit with modern ways of seeing the world – provided that, unlike Bill Bryson, we can conceive of human life as a journey, and that journey as having a transcendent end:

Lead me from the unreal to the Real;
Lead me from darkness to Light;
Lead me from death to Immortality.

To that prayer, a prayer for travellers on the human journey, I am sure Dante would say 'Amen'.