

## **Advent lectures: Westminster Abbey 2009**

### **Dante and the Human Journey**

#### **3. Heaven: In his will is our Peace**

##### **Introduction**

Over the last three weeks, we have journeyed with Dante through the circles of hell and the circuits around Mount Purgatory. At the highest point on Mount Purgatory, Dante is admitted, in the company of Statius, to the Earthly Paradise. No longer does he have the wounds or even the memory of sin. In the Earthly Paradise, he at last encounters Beatrice, who points the way to the stars. He is now about to enter the heavens.

We need to speak of the *heavens*, plural, because Dante borrows from the ancient world the Ptolemaic cosmology, in which there are a series of spheres above the earth, like a series of domes, in which the moon, the planets, the sun and the stars move in an ordered fashion. The poet ascends through these spheres towards the 'highest heaven', the Empyrean, which is the dwelling place of God.

As with the journey up Mount Purgatory, I think it is helpful to locate some of the theological background to Dante's thinking to get a sense of what he was trying to convey.

##### **Background to Dante's Ideas of Heaven**

The starting point has to be the passage in 2 Corinthians where Paul describes the experience of 'a man in Christ' – clearly himself – who was caught up into the 'third heaven':

It is necessary to boast; nothing is to be gained by it, but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows— was caught up into Paradise (*ton paradeison*) and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. (2 Cor 12:1-4)

The *third* heaven in Hebrew cosmology is the highest heaven – or the 'heaven of heavens'. For our understanding of Dante, we need to note that in the 'third heaven' Paul did not know whether he was 'in the body or out of the body'. In the experiences of heaven that Dante describes, the body as we know it is increasingly left behind. It is striking that Paul seems to use the word 'heaven' or the 'third heaven' and 'paradise' interchangeably. The idea that Paul heard 'things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat' is picked up by Dante who tells us that what takes place in the highest heaven can only be *suggested* but is actually indescribable. We do not have words for it. We may borrow words and imagery, as does the Book of Revelation, but the experience of the Empyrean transcends anything which can be spoken of on earth.

I mentioned last week the importance of Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* for the notion of mystical ascent – the kind of ascent that is reflected in the ascent of Mount Purgatory. There is an important passage in the Second Letter to the Corinthians, where Paul reflects on the experience of Moses:

Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image *from one degree of glory to another*; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Cor 3: 12 -18)

Gregory uses this passage in 2 Corinthians to suggest that when Christians behold the glory of the Lord (that is, when we see the Lord 'face to face') we can still *advance* 'from glory to glory' (the notion of *epektasis*). In his *Life of Moses*, he describes how Moses was 'lifted up' to share in the glory of God, but this sharing only created the desire for greater transformation, so that he asks God to appear to him 'not according to [Moses'] capacity to partake but according to God's true being':

For this reason we also say that the great Moses, as he was becoming ever greater, at no time stopped in his ascent, nor did he set a limit for himself in his upward course. Once having set foot on the ladder which God set up (as Jacob says), he continually climbed to the step above and never ceased to rise higher, because he always found a step higher than the one he had attained. ...

He shone with glory. And although lifted up through such lofty experiences, he is still unsatisfied in his desire for more. He still thirsts for that with which he constantly filled himself to capacity, and he asks to attain as if he had never partaken, beseeching God to appear to him, not according to his capacity to partake, but according to God's true being.

And the bold request which goes up the mountains of desire asks this: to enjoy the Beauty not in mirrors and reflections, but face to face.<sup>1</sup>

This is the notion that is referred to in the hymn, 'From glory to glory advancing, we praise thee, O Lord', and by Charles Wesley when he writes, '*Changed from glory into glory till in heaven we see thy face*'. Wesley makes it very clear that there is an *advance* in glory to the point at which the believer sees the 'face of God'.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, translated by Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, Classics of Western Spirituality Series (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), pp.113-14.

Dante weaves in with this another theme. When Paul is discussing the resurrection, he says, ‘There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; indeed, star differs from star in glory.’ (1 Cor 15:40-41). It seems to me likely that Dante took this idea and linked it with the idea of *advancing* from glory to glory through the heavenly spheres. Dante weaves together: first, ideas of ‘mystical ascent’; then, ‘being changed from glory to glory’; then, the distinctive glory of the sun, the moon and the stars; and, finally, that of seeing God ‘face to face’, the Beatific Vision.

The notion that the goal and end of human life is to *see God* lies deep within the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. We are told that the Lord used to speak to Moses ‘face to face’ as a man talks with a friend (Exod 33:11), and that Moses did not know that when he had been talking with God his face shone. From that point, he wore a veil over his face (Exod 34:29-35) – the idea that Paul is playing with in the passage we heard from 2 Corinthians. Another key text, familiar from Handel’s Messiah, was ‘I know that my redeemer liveth, ... though ... worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God’ (Job 19:25-6, KJV). With Christian belief in the incarnation, the idea that the face of God could be seen in Jesus Christ developed strongly. The Book of Revelation opens with a glorious vision of the Risen Christ in which his face is as ‘the sun shining with full force’ (1:16). The response of the Seer is to fall at his feet ‘as though dead’. In the normal course of events, we human beings cannot look directly at the sun without damaging or even destroying our sight; this inability to look direct at the sun has long been taken as a metaphor for human inability to look at the face of God without being consumed. And yet there is the longing to see, to press on, to ascend towards God - drawn on by the glory of God reflected in the world. Writing about Gregory of Nyssa, Rowan Williams puts it this way:

If the Christian life is a journey into God, it is a journey into infinity – not an abstract ‘absoluteness’ but an infinity of what Gregory simply calls ‘goodness’, an infinite resource of mercy, help and delight. And because of its limitless nature, this journey is always marked by *desire*, by hope and longing, never coming to possess or control its object.<sup>2</sup>

Shortly after Gregory lived and wrote in the East, Augustine was living and writing in the West. Augustine described the goal of the Christian life, the experience of heaven, in these famous words: ‘There we shall be still and 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?’<sup>3</sup> Though he says that ‘there we shall ... see’, Augustine offers no description of the vision of God. The vision of God is ineffable, inexpressible. What he speaks about again and again – and this is vital for Dante – is the *relation* the believer has with God, so that we are *attracted* by the love of God, and the more we respond to this love the more we feel its attraction: Augustine’s word is ‘desire’, ‘*desiderium*’. In this he echoes the psalmist: ‘Like as the heart desireth (‘*desiderat*’) the water-brooks: so longeth (‘*desiderat*’) my soul after thee, O God. My soul is athirst for God, yea, even for the

<sup>2</sup> R.D. Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), pp. 55-6.

<sup>3</sup> *De Civ. Dei*, XXII, 30, translated by John O’Meara: London: Pelican, 1972 (Penguin Classic edition, 1984), p. 1091.

living God: when shall I come to appear before the presence of God?’ (Ps 42.1-2).<sup>4</sup> This longing can equally well be expressed as a longing for *peace*, for an experience of that peace which is a foretaste of the eternal peace of heaven. Thus, in one of Augustine’s most famous remarks he says, ‘Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee’. We could translate this into Dante’s terms by saying, ‘Our hearts are wayward till they find the way to thee’. At the human pole of Augustine’s theology of grace is a concern for the education of desire. As wayward human beings, we are creatures of desire, but our chaotic desires are desires for the wrong things, for things that do not satisfy. We love destructively. What is necessary is for the attractive force of perfect love to re-direct our desires back to the source of the love that calls us, for us to be purged of self-centredness and purified by immersion in the pure love of God. This is the way that brings peace to the heart; the peace which is a foretaste of the peace of heaven. Throughout the *Divine Comedy*, which is one long essay in the education of desire, and especially in the *Paradiso*, the words ‘love’ and ‘peace’ recur constantly.

There is a third Augustinian keyword which should be mentioned in this context: the will. Augustine wrote at length on the freedom of the will. For Augustine, basing his thought on Paul, the human will is captive: it is *not free not to sin*. Paul wrote: ‘I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. . . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.’ (Rom 7:15-19) This puzzled him greatly, as it puzzled Augustine after him. Both of them found they could desire the good but they could not, however much they desired it, achieve it. Their struggles to do the good only made things worse, and brought them to the point of despair. They saw themselves as captives of sin, needing liberation. Augustine reflected a great deal on this liberation. It was the need for liberation that made him in the end turn away from the Greek philosophers: the Greeks could tell you about goodness and asceticism, but had no means of sustaining the union with God of which they had a real intuition. Following their teaching, as we saw last week, Augustine came into touch with the divine wisdom, but only fleetingly, only enough to feed his *desire* for more. What he discovered in Christianity, by contrast, was the astonishing teaching that, out of love for lost humanity, God had reaches out to human beings, creating a way to draw us back into union with him. The key to the human response is the freeing of the will from the bondage of sin. When the will is freed, we can respond to the promptings of love and the intuition of peace. Or, as Dante says, ‘In his will is our peace’.

The whole structure of the *Divine Comedy* is profoundly Augustinian. It shows God reaching out through the agency of Beatrice and other intermediaries to draw Dante back from the wrong track. As Beatrice explains when she commissions Vergil to seek out Dante:

*I' son Beatrice che ti faccio andare;  
vegno del loco ove tornar disio;  
amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare.*

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<sup>4</sup> ‘*Quaemadmodum desiderat cervus ad fontes aquarum: ita desiderat anima mea ad te, Deus*’ (Vulgate: Ps 42:1) cf. Ps 84:2.

Beatrice am I, who do bid thee go;  
 I come from there, where I would fain return;  
 Love moved me, which compelleth me to speak.<sup>5</sup>

Dante the poet has dramatised the divine initiative which is intended to bring him back on the right track, tracing the initiative back through Beatrice to Mary herself; he establishes that the initiative which reaches out to Dante the pilgrim is one of pure – or purified – love. Thus Dante’s love for Beatrice, and hers for him, is from the beginning of the *Divine Comedy*, established as a conduit of the divine love for the human soul.

In the third circuit of the *Purgatorio*, which is concerned with failures of love, Vergil teaches Dante more about the nature of love. He explains how the perversion of love produces pride, envy and wrath. Dante then asks him to define love, to which ‘every good work and its opposite’ can be reduced. Vergil responds:

The soul, which is created apt to love,  
 Is mobile unto everything that pleases,  
 Soon as by pleasure she is waked to action.  
 Your apprehension from some real thing  
 An image draws, and in yourselves displays it  
 So that it makes the soul turn unto it.  
 And if, when turned, towards it she incline,  
*Love is that inclination; ...*  
 So comes the captive soul into *desire*,  
 Which is a motion spiritual, and ne’er rests  
 Until she doth enjoy the thing beloved.<sup>6</sup>

When Dante says, ‘so comes the captive soul into desire’ this is pure Augustinianism. He goes on to explain that such desire is a ‘motion spiritual, and ne’er rests until she doth enjoy the thing beloved.’ This is a version of ‘Thou has made us for thyself and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in thee’, for it talks about the awakening of desire and the restlessness that follows until the soul ‘doth enjoy the thing beloved’. We don’t at first know what it is we seek in and through nature: we know only the desire for something more. But, if we will let it, the very desire for that which transcends nature can lead us on.

In the last Cantos of the *Paradiso*, Beatrice explains more to Dante about the fulfilment of love. In the Empyrean, the last sphere of Heaven:

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<sup>5</sup> *Inferno* II.70-72.

<sup>6</sup> *L'animo, ch'è creato ad amar presto,  
 ad ogni cosa è mobile che piace,  
 tosto che dal piacere in atto è desto.  
 Vostra apprensiva da esser verace  
 tragge intenzione, e dentro a voi la spiega,  
 sì che l'animo ad essa volger face;  
 e se, rivolto, inver' di lei si piega,  
 quel piegare è amor, ...  
 così l'animo preso entra in disire,  
 ch'è moto spiritale, e mai non posa  
 fin che la cosa amata il fa gioire.* (*Purgatorio* XVIII. 19-32)

With voice and gesture of a perfect leader  
 {Beatrice} recommenced: "We from the greatest body  
 Have issued to the heaven that is pure light;  
*Light intellectual replete with love,*  
 Love of true good replete with ecstasy,  
 Ecstasy that transcendeth every sweetness.<sup>7</sup>

Beatrice is here the 'perfect leader' who has taken over as '*duce*' from the imperfect Vergil. The descriptive imagery now begins to emphasise light: 'light intellectual replete with love; love of true good replete with ecstasy'. This merging of love into light reflects the Johannine, 'God is light and in him there is no darkness at all' (1 Jn 1:5), together with the much quoted verse from the psalms: 'In thy light shall we see light' (Ps 36:9). In the language Dante uses there is a continual emphasis on *seeing*: here he *sees* a river of *light* (Paradiso XXX.61). He describes how:

*Lume è là sù che visibile face  
 lo creatore a quella creatura  
 che solo in lui vedere ha la sua pace.*

There is a light above, which visible  
 Makes the Creator unto every creature,  
 Who only in beholding Him has peace.

This is the point at which Beatrice herself departs from Dante the pilgrim, leaving him in the care of Bernard. By introducing Bernard as his guide at this final stage of mystic union, Dante is paying a huge tribute to the greatest mystical writer of the medieval western church. Where Augustine concentrated in his mystical writing on the drawing power of love, and the healing of the will, Bernard went beyond such attraction and longing to write about mystical union. He is well-known for his writings on Mary and for his sermons on the Song of Songs. It was Bernard above all who legitimated Dante's use of human, erotic desire as a means of expressing divine love, and the fulfilment of desire as a means of expressing the union of the soul with God. Both for Bernard and Dante the way of speaking about such union is to speak about vision, about *seeing* God. So, it is in the company of Bernard that Dante comes to the Beatific Vision, the vision of God that fulfils and brings to an end all desires:

And I, who to the end of all desires  
 Was now approaching, even as I ought,  
 The ardour of desire within me ended.  
 Bernard was beckoning unto me, and smiling,  
 That I should upward look; but I already  
 Was of my own accord such as he wished  
 Because my sight, becoming purified,

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<sup>7</sup> *con atto e voce di spedito duce  
 ricominciò: «Noi siamo usciti fore  
 del maggior corpo al ciel ch'è pura luce:  
 luce intellettuale, piena d'amore;  
 amor di vero ben, pien di letizia;  
 letizia che trascende ogne dolzore.* (Paradiso XXX.37-42)

Was entering more and more into the ray  
Of the High Light which of itself is true.<sup>8</sup>

What he sees, he describes as he addresses God:

O grace abundant, by which I presumed  
To fix my sight upon the Light Eternal,  
So that the seeing I consumed therein!  
I saw that in its depth far down is lying  
Bound up with love together in one volume,  
What through the universe in leaves is scattered;  
Substance, and accident, and their operations,  
All interfused together in such wise  
That what I speak of is *one simple light*.<sup>9</sup>

This is as much as Dante will say about the Beatific Vision: what he saw consisted in ‘one simple light’ – though he presents this as the light in trinitarian form. This is the Uncreated Light of God, the light out of which God said ‘let there be light’; the light which brought creation into being. The uncreated light has no intellectual content that Dante can describe, except to say that all the manifold aspects of creation are ‘bound up with love together’. The Beatific Vision leaves no memory other than one of ‘sweetness’. In the end love and light have for Dante become one.

### The Story

I have tried in the first half of this lecture to bring out some of the theological themes that underlie and bind together Dante’s extraordinary vision. There is nothing fanciful about this, because we know Dante was extraordinarily learned in the theology, philosophy, literature and the science of his day. It is far more likely that we will underestimate the theological coherence of his vision than that we will overestimate it. What ties together the whole Divine Comedy is the sense of advancement, of moral and spiritual progress. Paradoxically, where the moral and

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<sup>8</sup> *E io ch'al fine di tutt'i disii  
appropinquava, sì com'io dovea,  
l'ardor del desiderio in me finii.  
Bernardo m'accennava, e sorridea,  
perch'io guardassi suso; ma io era  
già per me stesso tal qual ei volea:  
ché la mia vista, venendo sincera,  
e più e più intrava per lo raggio  
de l'alta luce che da sé è vera.*

<sup>9</sup> *Oh abbondante grazia ond'io presunsi  
ficcar lo viso per la luce etterna,  
tanto che la veduta vi consunsi!  
Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna  
legato con amore in un volume,  
ciò che per l'universo si squaderna:  
sustanze e accidenti e lor costume,  
quasi conflati insieme, per tal modo  
che ciò ch'i' dico è un semplice lume.* (Paradiso. XXXIII.82-90)

spiritual advancement of Dante the pilgrim is least – that is in hell – the descriptions of what he sees are at their most vivid. As he begins to be changed, and as his journey becomes more explicitly guided by theological ideas, the language becomes less concrete. It is harder to tell the ‘story’ of his journey up Mount Purgatory and through the Earthly Paradise. Hardest of all is to tell the ‘story’ of his ascent through the heavens: more and more Dante the poet wants us to understand the experience, an experience beyond simple description, by his references to sound, especially music, to dance, to love, peace and light.

Dante begins *Paradiso* with an explicit reference to God’s glory, and then to 2 Corinthians 12:

*La gloria di colui che tutto move  
per l’universo penetra, e risplende  
in una parte più e meno altrove.  
Nel ciel che più de la sua luce prende  
fu’ io, e vidi cose che ridire  
nè sa nè può chi di lassù discende;*

THE glory of Him who moveth everything  
Doth penetrate the universe, and shine  
In one part more and in another less.  
Within that heaven which most his light receives  
Was I, and things beheld which to repeat  
Nor knows, nor can, who from above descends <sup>10</sup>

From the first, the suggestion is made that the glory of God shines less in one part of the universe and more in another: naturally, anyone drawn to the glory of God will want to ascend to that place where it is greatest. Dante follows the example of Beatrice and fixes his eyes on the sun. He finds himself drawn upwards through the sphere of fire – whether in the body or out of it he does not know – towards the sphere of the moon. Here Beatrice answers Dante’s questions about the shadows on the face of the moon, and here Dante meets the spirits of those who have been compelled to break their vows. He asks Piccarda whether she is content to be where she is, to which she replies, famously, ‘*E’n la sua volontate è nostra pace*’: ‘In his will is our peace’. Beatrice also explains that the dwelling place of the souls is in the Empyrean, with the angels and God, but they have come to meet Dante in the spheres that accord with their state.

Dante and Beatrice now ascend to the sphere of Mercury, where they encounter the spirits of those who were tinged with ambition, especially that of the Christian emperor Justinian (527-65), who codified the law of the empire. Justinian explains that the purpose of the law is to ensure peace by upholding justice, and gives a brief history of the Empire up to Charlemagne, expounding this. On his departure, Beatrice explains how in the fall and the redemption of humanity justice was served, tempered with mercy and love. In this Canto (VII), where Dante gives his fullest account of why God became Man, the theological influence of Anselm is unmistakable.

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<sup>10</sup> *Paradiso* I.1-6.

Now Dante and Beatrice ascend to the heaven of Venus, where they meet those who have shown weaknesses of love. The fourth heaven is that of the sun. Here Dante becomes absorbed in contemplation of God, and then he and Beatrice are surrounded by twelve spirits who appear as lights, forming a crown, and they hear music beyond anything that can be heard on earth. These spirits include Thomas Aquinas, Albert the Great, Dionysius the Areopagite and Boethius, the philosopher, beloved of Christians. Here Thomas speaks to Dante about Francis (and laments the decline of the order to which he himself belongs, the Dominicans); then Bonaventura speaks to Dante about Dominic (and laments the decline of the order to which he belongs, the Franciscans).

The next heaven is the heaven of Mars, which glows red, but here Dante and Beatrice see a vision of a great white cross, from which flashes a vision of Christ. Dante sees lights which are the spirits of those who have been warriors for Christ. Here he meets the spirit of his ancestor Cacciaguida who followed the Emperor Conrad III on the Second Crusade (1147-9), where he was knighted and killed. Dante the poet uses the figure of Cacciaguida to praise the Florence of a former era and to lament the sad decline of his native city in his own day. Cacciaguida then prophesies Dante's exile, instigated by the pope, and his subsequent wanderings. It is Cacciaguida who tells Dante to make his vision manifest (*'tutta tua vision fa manifesta'*<sup>11</sup>). He is to tell all: his own personal agenda (and desire to settle scores) is thus thoroughly mixed up with his theological vision.

Now Dante finds himself in the white light of the heaven of Jupiter. Here the spirits spell out the opening words of the Book of Wisdom: 'Love righteousness, ye that be judges of the earth'. Here the spirits of the just form themselves into the shape of an eagle. Dante raises the question of God's justice: how can it be just that an Indian who has never heard the name of Christ can be excluded from paradise? The answer is robust:

"O animals of earth, O stupid minds,  
The primal will, that in itself is good,  
Ne'er from itself, the *Good Supreme*, has moved.  
So much is just as is accordant with it;  
No good created draws it to itself,  
But it, by raying forth, occasions that."<sup>12</sup>

In the first lecture, we saw Dante struggling with the justice of condemning souls to hell; here he struggles once more with the justice of God, but in heaven the contextualisation of God's judgment in *'la somma sapienza e 'l prima amore'* is much more convincing. Here, we can see why Dante simply accepts the goodness of God's justice, even if he doesn't understand it. In the heaven of Jupiter, the eagle lists the just rulers of earth. Dante himself reflects on predestination, admitting that we

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<sup>11</sup> Paradiso XVII.128.

<sup>12</sup> *Oh terreni animali! oh menti grosse!*

*La prima volontà, ch'è da sé buona,*

*da sé, ch'è sommo ben, mai non si mosse.*

*Cotanto è giusto quanto a lei consuona:*

*nullo creato bene a sé la tira,*

*ma essa, radiando, lui cagiona».* (Paradiso XIX. 85-90, translation amended)

humans don't know everything: we don't yet know who are the elect, chosen by God, and in this defect there is the opportunity for our will to be conformed to the will of God:

“O thou predestination, how remote  
 Thy root is from the aspect of all those  
 Who the First Cause do not behold entire!  
 And you, O mortals! hold yourselves restrained  
 In judging ; for ourselves, who look on God,  
 We do not know as yet all the elect;  
 And sweet to us is such a deprivation,  
 Because *our good in this good is made perfect,*  
*That whatsoever God wills, we also will.*"<sup>13</sup>

The next sphere is that of Saturn. Here Dante sees a ladder of light: Jacob's ladder up and down which there move lights, the spirits of the contemplatives. Now he meets the spirit of Peter Damian, who laments the decline of his old monastery at Fonte Avellana, and also the degraded quality of the bishops in Dante's day. The brightest of the lights approaches him: it is Benedict, who laments the fact that none of the monks of Dante's time ascend Jacob's ladder, but then Benedict is whisked into the highest heaven, the Empyrean, promising Dante that there he shall see his full God-given glory.

Now Dante ascends to the heaven of the fixed stars, where, having looked down all the way whence he has come, he is given a vision of Christ in light. Here, Peter examines Dante on his faith; then James questions him on his hope; and John, whose light temporarily blinds him, on his love. Peter laments the degeneracy of the popes who have made to flow from the papacy a sewer of filth, to the delight of Satan (XXVII.19-27). Beatrice and Dante now come to the *Primum Mobile*, the highest heaven in which there is movement. Here the angelic orders are represented by circles of light whirling around a central point. On this point of light 'the heaven and the whole of nature depends'. From here '*s'apersi in nuovi amor l'eterno amor*' (the eternal love opened itself in new love', XXIX.16). Beatrice now appears to Dante more beautiful than ever. She explains that they have entered the heaven which is pure light:

*luce intellettuale, piena d'amore;*  
*amor di vero ben, pien di letizia;*  
*letizia che trascende ogni dolzore.*

Light intellectual replete with love,  
 Love of true good replete with ecstasy,

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<sup>13</sup> *O predestinazion, quanto remota  
 è la radice tua da quelli aspetti  
 che la prima cagion non veggion tota!  
 E voi, mortali, tenetevi stretti  
 a giudicar; ché noi, che Dio vedemo,  
 non conosciamo ancor tutti li eletti;  
 ed ène dolce così fatto scemo,  
 perché il ben nostro in questo ben s'affina,  
 che quel che vole Iddio, e noi volemo».* (Paradiso XX.133-38)

Ecstasy that transcendeth every sweetness. (Paradiso XXX.40-42)

Here Dante sees a white rose, consisting of the spirits of the redeemed. He turns to speak with Beatrice, only to encounter an old man, Bernard, who indicates where she sits above them, within the rose. Dante's last words to Beatrice – he addresses her as 'tu' -are words of prayer:

*“Tu m'hai di servo tratto a libertate  
per tutte quelle vie, per tutt'i modi  
che di ciò fare avei la potestate.”*

“Thou from a slave hast brought me unto freedom,  
By all those ways, by all the expedients,  
Whereby thou hadst the power of doing it.  
Preserve towards me thy magnificence,  
So that this soul of mine, which thou hast healed,  
Pleasing to thee be loosened from the body.”  
Thus I implored ; and she, so far away,  
Smiled, as it seemed, and looked once more at me  
Then unto the eternal fountain turned. <sup>14</sup>

Dante is now in the care of Bernard. Now he sees that the rose is cleft down the middle, on one side being the souls who looked forward to the birth of Christ, and on the other those who rejoiced in it in retrospect. I have already spoken about how the Beatific Vision is vouchsafed to him as a vision of light. Here Dante at last sees the full glory of the redeemed, and especially of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The final lines of the final Canto of the Divine Comedy speak of the vision of God as a vision of light and a vision of Trinity. In the end, words fail him, but at this point he has become one with the love that moves the sun and other stars:

*All' 'alta fantasia qui mancò possa;  
ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle,  
sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,  
l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.*

Here vigour failed the lofty fantasy:  
But now was turning my desire and will,  
Even as a wheel that equally is moved,  
The Love which moves the sun and the other stars. <sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Tu m'hai di servo tratto a libertate  
per tutte quelle vie, per tutt'i modi  
che di ciò fare avei la potestate.*

*La tua magnificenza in me custodi,  
sì che l'anima mia, che fatt'hai sana,  
piacente a te dal corpo si disnodi».  
Così orai; e quella, sì lontana  
come pareva, sorrise e riguardommi;  
poi si tornò a l'eterna fontana. (Paradiso. 85-92)*

<sup>15</sup> Paradiso XXXIII.142-5.

These are the last words of the Divine Comedy, Dante's last known words. After writing this, he had no more to say.

### **Conclusion: Dante and the Human Journey**

Throughout these lectures, I have argued that Dante is not interested in giving us *information* about life beyond this life. In the first place, this is because he wouldn't have made as strong a distinction as we do between the two: he simply wanted to talk about *Life*, about *Reality*, about the wider context of light and love which makes sense of human life. However, he is also well aware that he is drawing on and developing a tradition of imagery with a long history, which has been used both to guide believers through this life and to give a glimpse of the life beyond. Throughout the Divine Comedy there is an extraordinary dual focus: one focus reaches to the depths of hell and to the highest heaven; the other explores what are sometimes the minutiae of people's lives and the politics of Dante's era. Dante is famous for condemning popes to hell, and when he speaks of the failures of emperors, kings, and the city-states of his time, principally Florence, he can sound ill-tempered and vitriolic. What holds the two foci together, more than anything, is the character of Beatrice, who was a Florentine girl, known to Dante, who died prematurely, but also a heavenly figure, whose love for Dante guides him safely through hell, purgatory and to the very presence of God.

There is so much we can take from the Divine Comedy for our own human journey, but let me suggest simply this: *we are in the end formed by what we love*. Perhaps this is a lesson easier to learn in the second half of our lives, when we have passed the mid-point and begin to see the effects of our loving, both in our own lives and those of others. Dante is right to see in love a movement of the whole being: we are attracted by objects or persons, and we reach out towards them. Our choices about what we love are circumscribed: in our culture we are educated in love of many things that are trivial or harmful. It is far from easy to love wisely or well. What the Christian Faith, the path to which Dante returns, teaches is that love is indeed a way to transcend our selfishness, our weakness, our destructiveness, and that if we open ourselves to the transcendent love from which we have come and to which we return, we shall find ourselves strengthened through the education of desire. The human journey can, if we so will, be one of such learning, such discipline. In the end, life is about learning how we too may be moved by 'the Love which moves the sun and the other stars'; that is God's will for humanity and 'in his will is our peace'.