

Heavenly minded

by [Michael Battle](#) in the [October 10, 2001](#) issue

Throughout much of history, opium has been used as a narcotic to ease human suffering. In the Western world, however, opium has become a narcotic of mere escape, usually used by the rich or those who have abandoned life altogether in order to experience the drug. Followers of Jesus learn that the rich share an identity with the desperate: there is no evidence of harmony between how they live life here on earth and how they look up to heaven.

Heaven is a complicated concept. Those who claim to be Christians often justify their oppression of the poor by saying that the poor will have their reward in heaven. During slavery, white Christians told black Christians not to worry about suffering in this life because “we will all go to heaven.” Unfortunately, this has also become the identity of Western Christians, who are accused of escaping ideologically from the real world of poverty and disease. We are seen as heavenly minded people with no earthly use. This reasoning led Karl Marx to call Christianity an opiate.

Paul urges Timothy to avoid shallow conceptions of heaven and to avoid oppressing others in order to get there. His lesson to all of us is this: God is saving us *now* for heaven. We are being saved now to eventually live with God. None of us can say who belongs in heaven. Those with the most despised identities of the times—i.e., a tax collector—belong there. Jesus even suggests that our vision of economics on earth should reflect the penitent tax collector’s vision of heaven.

What will heaven be like? In London’s *Sunday Telegraph* of April 27, cancer-stricken Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu remarked in an interview:

I wonder whether they have rum and Coke in Heaven? Maybe it’s too mundane a pleasure, but I hope so—as a sundowner. Except, of course, the sun never goes down there. Oh, man, this heaven is going to take some getting used to.

What will heaven be like? Scripture leads us to believe that heaven will be the completion of our earthly existence. We will have no need of an exploding star (the sun) or a lifeless planet (the moon) to be our light. We will have no need of *jihad*

because all nations will be healed by eating the leaves of a tree of life. Shouldn't this make us rejoice? Shouldn't we take great delight in the knowledge that we will be complete, in need of nothing? We should, but as Tutu points out, we have our own image of what delights us.

If I asked everyone on the planet what do you most desire, what would "complete" you, I would have as many answers as there are people. We should, however, have a common answer as to what heaven is like. Jesus gives us this answer in Luke 18:13, when the tax collector, instead of looking up to heaven, beats his breast and addresses God. "God! Be merciful to me a sinner!"

The ultimate answer to what heaven is like is this: God. The miracle of the tax collector's spirituality is that in his action of "beating his breast," he is praying for God's presence. No longer can he do to others as he has done. This way of being on earth—in prayer—should be our practice. Heaven is entered into and practiced on earth through repentance and practical change.

In light of tragic national events, I am afraid that our answers to what heaven is like will leave out a common, global response: practices of repentance and practical change that access uninhibited presence with God. Instead, we speak words of vengeance.

Archbishop of Wales Rowan Williams helps us to address our fears. How, he asks, can we be in heaven knowing that others are in hell? In other words: How can heaven be heaven if there is a hell? We must understand heaven as God's presence through the practices of mercy and humility. We must gain the vision of God's unrelenting love.

If we don't look to heaven, bend the knee and pray to the living God, we will cling to visions in which eschatological destruction, hijacked planes and addictive drugs are our basis for understanding our deepest needs. We must seek discernment for how to live here on earth—not through the stereotypes of "heavenly minded and of no earthly use" Christians or "zealot Shi'ite" Muslims who only wreak havoc—but by becoming catalysts for governments that write constitutions such as that of South Africa and catalysts for public repentance, vowing never to harm another human being, as with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. A focus on our common relationship in heaven helps us find synthesis in the catholic (universal) church that is commissioned to move alongside suffering communities into

redemption and the healing of the nations.

Our answer to what heaven is like should be a common answer—uninhibited presence with God. As Tutu said:

It is enough just to be there. You know how it is when you are sitting with someone you love and hours can go by in what seem like moments? Well, in heaven, eternity itself will pass in a flash. In heaven we will never tire. We will never be bored because there will always be such new sides of God that will be revealed to us.