**Heaven**

All is well inside this tiny wooden hut on the edge of a western Scottish sea-loch. The old stove has kept us warm all day, we've cooked tea and now, with the dishes cleared away, we sit and read or write by the light of candles and a gas-lamp. Outside it is pitch black. The moon will creep over the wood behind the hut at about 10pm and then the bay will be bathed in light, the water sparkling as on a summers day.

I go for a darkness-walk, led only by my small torch and over 40 years of knowing the paths and rocks and beach. And as I do so heaven pours its blessing on me, from far above my head, like a starlit painting. Always, but always, it takes my breath away; there are no sodium lights to dazzle, for the nearest is over five miles away across the loch in the small village. And as yet no moon to hide the twinkling of a million stars.

Cassiopeia is clear - and Orion will appear at about 2am. But for now I just gaze at it all and wonder. Without a telescope, I simply use my binoculars to see that around every apparent single star are scores more - as if waiting for me to discover them. I hold out my arm and know that there is nothing between my hand and Pleiades. I have to constantly remind myself that this is not two-dimensional wallpaper, but three dimensions of infinite depth. I have to say to myself again and again "Look, if you stretched your arm out about 100 light years long it still wouldn't reach the middle of space, let alone the far edge".

This is God showering on me his warmth and love, revealed tonight in a myriad flecks of light. This 'panorama above my head' is one reason why I call this bay, this hut, these rocks and paths, ***heaven***.

But what makes a place heaven? Maybe it's where God reveals himself to us, though he is, we believe, present as the holy spirit in each person and that we carry God with us as we travel and as we live.

What is the secret ingredient that enables us to say about a particular place "this is heavenly" or "here is heaven for me"? Is it that we find a place for the first time and are over-awed by its wonder, it's beauty? Or can it be found in a place where we have been many times – the warm familiarity giving it the feeling of heaven?

Maybe to get closer to an answer (if indeed an answer is attainable) we need to do discern those factors that are 'heavenly'. Is it the beauty of the place, the interplay of outline, shape, colour, texture? Or is it memories? Is it in fact both of these – or neither? Is it something totally intangible, inexplicable, unprove-able? Is it the indefinable 'thin-ness' of certain places – where God just **IS**? Maybe I have to leave it as one of those wonderful mysteries that life offers us. Too often I have been analytical about things, sometimes in a career-minded scientific way. Now I am better at avoiding analysis to simply sit with the mystery of it all.

The kingdom of heaven on earth, that's the goal for us all. But we don't do it alone. We are companion-ed all the way by the presence of God which occasionally, just occasionally, bursts in on us like a rush of a mighty wind – a revealing of Gods own self and a shouting as loud as he can "I am here! I am for you!"

Maybe that's the feeling that the disciples experienced on that Pentecost day two millennia ago. Those of us who, like me on this dark November night, might be feeling a bit low in spirits, can be at peace as God declares his glory and his oft-repeated promise of love – "do not be afraid. All is well. I am here. And I will never leave you."

It's staggering to think that such is the speed of light (or the absolutely unimaginable distances in the realms of God's creation), that the light reaching my eyes from some of these dust-specks of stars, left their star-surface at the very moment when dinosaurs were still on the Earth. So the light we see from these stars reveals what that star may have looked like 25 million years ago - not how it is today. How our small minds need to be challenged by the grandeur of God!

I look up once more at the Milky Way – a cloud of dust stretching across from the wood to the far horizon beyond the distant hills. Seen through binoculars it's as if there are hidden stars waiting in the background for their turn to come forward and be glimpsed, to be part of a named constellation.

Who is to say that there is not some other civilisation on a far distant planet, where the stars, as seen by them, form patterns that only they have described. They will look at these constellations in the night sky and see distant stars and wonder if there are other forms of life upon them.  They will look in wonder and amazement at the feast of light spread before their eyes – a feast in which one of the million pinpricks of starlight visible to their eyes has, upon its surface, a bay and a hut and a warm stove, where one person's faith is being rekindled again.

 *Paul Heppleston*