

Week 5

The Life of the World To Come

Evelyn Underhill

**We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.**

Begin the session with a period of quiet reflection and/or prayer.

A Bible Reading

1 John 3. 1-3; Revelation 4; 5

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An audio version of this reflection is available in the Lent 2025 section of the Diocesan Website:

The final phrase in the Creed – is, ‘we look for... the life of the world to come.’ I find it striking how this final phrase relates to the first phrase of the Creed, ‘We believe in one God... maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.’ I think those words, ‘seen and unseen,’ provide a vital clue for understanding, ‘we look for... the life of the world to come.’ But does the ‘unseen’ just relate to heaven - life after death? Or is there also a sense that we look for ‘the life of the world to come’ - the unseen, the Eternal - in our physical reality now, while living on earth?

In exploring this final phrase of the Creed, I’m drawing upon the writings of the English Anglican writer, Evelyn Underhill, who died in 1941. For Underhill, this phrase was not just about looking forward to the new heaven and the new earth. Underhill had a vivid sense of ‘Eternity’ as experienced now; a sense of the Eternal Unseen - God - experienced now in our seen reality.

Underhill unpacks the phrase, ‘I look for the life of the world to come’ as, ‘I expect the life of the age that is drawing near. I expect Eternity as the very meaning and goal of all full human life, and especially of the Christian art of living.’¹ Underhill had a vibrant sense of Eternity - an intuitive sense of God, the Eternal Unseen, operating in her visible, clock-time world. An embroidered plaque with the word, ‘ETERNITY’, sat on her writing desk as a perpetual reminder of the need to try to stay alert and attentive to the big picture of Reality. We live in a much more expansive reality than just the world we can see and touch.

Eternity shining behind and through our seen reality

Underhill believed we live in two worlds - our visible world we experience through our senses, and the unseen, invisible world. But they’re not just separate worlds. Rather, the invisible reality of Eternity is constantly shining behind and through our visible, physical reality. Though we live in created clock-time, God - the Eternal One - is constantly with us, perpetually invading the present.

Much of the time we forget the big picture. So often we only focus on the small - obsessed and preoccupied with ourselves and the tiny details directly in front of us in our visible world. We often act like that's all there is! But we're only seeing part of the enormous reality of what is. 'In the beginning God...' We inhabit a much larger, more expansive reality than the tiny snapshot that so often calls for our attention. We need to widen and extend our field of view to capture more of the scene. Underhill argues that the 'eyes of worship have a wide-angle lens.'ⁱⁱ As we lift up our heads and adore God, we're drawn into that much more spacious reality of Eternity: 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.'ⁱⁱⁱ

As we start to gain a clearer sense of the big picture, becoming more aware of the unseen - Eternity, we start to loosen our clutch on the things of our physical world.^{iv} We remember that our earthly lives are fleeting: like grass that withers, like an early morning mist that vanishes.^v In the vast, rich reality of Eternity, we're just little. As we become more aware of and have faith in that invisible Presence - the 'one God' who enfolds us - our earthly lives become enriched with a greater sense of purpose.^{vi} We start to have more courage to love and engage in redemptive action and co-operation with God.^{vii} Each moment, incident, choice and opportunity of our lives becomes viewed as part of the Spirit's vast work of transformation as we are drawn towards the future.^{viii}

Looking for 'the life of the world to come'

Underhill looked for signs of the world to come. She expected to see God actively at work in the world around her. Having immersed herself in the writings of the Saints - our elder brothers and sisters who vividly recorded their experiences of the Eternal breaking into our physical world,^{ix} Underhill became confident that the Spirit, the 'giver of life' is constantly working in every part of our present earthly existence. To Underhill, when we look for the 'life of the world to come,' we see 'hints of it everywhere.'^x What did she mean by this?

Firstly, Underhill highlights the limits of our senses as we experience our earthly seen reality. At times we recognise hints or glimpses that more is going on in our

physical world than we can perceive with our bodily senses. For example, in the colour spectrum, 'hints of a more delicate loveliness' exist that are beyond our span of perception (think of infrared and ultraviolet light).^{xi} Or consider aural pitches that we can't detect but animals can hear, such as ultrasonic signals. Our physical world that we can see and touch in our clock-time is mysterious - filled with wonder, with so much to be curious about. So much is happening in our seen reality of which we're unaware.

But more significantly, consider the ongoing action that's constantly unperceived by us in the spiritual realm that's so much more immense! The Unseen - the Spirit - is like a 'hidden Artist,' constantly at work in our world.^{xii} Yet we're generally unaware of most of this ongoing action. We're like new-born kittens, whose eyes are closed - not yet open to our situation, though we can vaguely recognise the 'touch upon the fur.'^{xiii} At times we have a vague sense of feeling God's 'touch' - intuiting, sensing, tasting, recognising the Presence and action of the Spirit, but most of the time we're not sure what's going on. Our eyes are generally closed.

Similarly, if we imagine ourselves standing at the seashore looking out through fog over the water, through the haze we might dimly see a distant coastline. Though we can't make out any detail, we sense a mysterious assurance of a great country really there - a Presence; that 'dream-like outline' indicates to us a real country is actually there, though we can't quite make it out.^{xiv} The life of the world to come - that other Country - lies ahead of us, but so much is concealed from view.

Both of these analogies - the newborn kitten and our view through the fog - refer to how at times we might gain a vague sense or glimpse of 'the world to come' - a sense of something 'Other' than the here-and-now physical world we can see and touch, a sense of Eternity invading our physical world, but all of this is bathed in mystery. At times we gain a fleeting, vague impression of the 'substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.'^{xv} but all of this is deeply mysterious.

Maintaining a sense of God's mystery and mysterious action

Perhaps what's essential here is maintaining a sense of God's mystery and a deep sense of mystery around the way God – 'Eternity' – is constantly shining behind and through our seen world. It's easy to subtly think of God as simply an oversized human. But God is majestic, holy, completely 'Other' and full of mystery. Establishing a sense of God's mystery was recommended by Underhill as the best cure for the downward pull of our self-indulgence, emotional greed, restlessness and disillusionment with life.^{xvi} Maintaining a posture before God and the ways of God that is awe-struck and humble helps our prayer escape pettiness and helps keep this 'accent of Eternity.'^{xvii}

Glimpsing the sparkle of God's mysterious radiance and having heard the Spirit's whisper, helped Underhill keep trusting in God's creative purposes and ceaseless action, despite her bewilderment regarding disconcerting appearances and suffering.^{xviii} Like all of us, Underhill struggled, but she held the conviction of God's ongoing action in the world, so she expected to sense and discern God's Presence and see Him at work in her lived, earthly reality.

Expectant

Expectancy! If we don't expect to see God in action, if we don't expect to glimpse hints of the world to come which is drawing near, we won't be attentive or on the look-out for God's fingerprints, which are everywhere. Our world is constantly energised and upheld by God: each breath we take, each daffodil bulb breaking through the earth heralding spring, each sunrise, each tiny sign of transformation in human lives and situations. But so often we're too distracted, busy, or weary to notice the action of the Spirit around us and in us. But whether we're attentive or not, the Spirit is constantly at work in every part of life. But not just in our individual lives or churches, but everywhere – both inside the Church and outside of it – even in the most unlikely places. God's fingerprints are everywhere to be seen.

Underhill encourages us to have a glad expectancy of the Spirit's action – taking each incident, moment, opportunity, choice as material through which the Spirit can transform^{xix}. She encourages us to look 'through and beyond Time towards Eternity.'^{xx} God is always there before we arrive on the scene; God is always with us and is constantly invading our world; all of life is supported and penetrated by the Holy Spirit.^{xxi}

Our Eternal God is drawing us towards the future – 'the world to come' – yet so often we're bogged down by our present pain and sufferings that we forget the hope-filled journey we're actually on. So what might be some spiritual practices that might help us keep the big picture of Eternity so we can be attentive to how God is working in our world, our communities, our churches and in our lives? What are some rhythms that might help us as we look for the life of the world to come?

Some spiritual practices

Underhill emphasised the necessity of constantly being oriented and reoriented to Eternity. It's a continual spiritual practice so partaking in rhythms of prayer and worship – both alone and communally – can help us be more attentive and wake us up to the big picture of Eternity and God's perpetual Presence with us and action amongst us.

Slowing down is essential so we can try to notice what God is doing in our world and help us focus more on the big picture. It might be as simple as praying a small chunk of a Psalm in an unhurried, lingering fashion each morning, so we're immersed in God's expansive world, rather than simply focused on the here-and-now and the daily news cycle. Another daily rhythm is prayerful reflection at the close of each day upon the day's events and conversations and considering, 'when was I aware of God? Was God trying to catch my attention through that event or conversation or moment?' Closing this end-of-day reflection, we pray for more consciousness of God the following day, which can help us become more expectant of noticing God's action and Presence tomorrow.

Engaging in a weekly Sabbath enables us to stop work, rest and prayerfully and leisurely look back at the past week and reflect upon what God has been doing, and thus have more of an idea about how to participate more effectively in His work the following week.

Walking slowly and being immersed in the beauty of creation is another way of being attentive to God that can lead us into adoration. 'The heavens declare the glory of God!' Also, meditative, slow reading of small chunks of the Gospels (getting to know Jesus' voice!) and devotional reading of short excerpts of writing from the Saints – the Invisible Church, the 'Cloud of Witnesses' – can also spur us on and teach us more about the unseen Reality.^{xxii} Such slow, meditative reading is like a lozenge melting in our mouths.

Also, communal spiritual practices are enormously important, such as partaking of the Eucharist. As we partake, we're not just looking back and remembering Jesus' death and resurrection with thanksgiving. We also look forward – we remember the future. Jesus, through His death and resurrection, has conquered death. In joyful hope we're being drawn into the life of the world to come; we anticipate seeing Jesus face-to-face in that magnificent world where there's no crying or pain. The wonder and mystery of all of this is far beyond our wildest imaginations!

Underhill encourages us to rhythms of stopping, being quiet and listening, so we can try to discern how the Spirit is active in our lives and our communities. Silence was viewed as key in Underhill's attentiveness to Eternity. This quietude is more than simply not talking; it's a complete change in how our minds are used so we can be attentive to Eternity through a restful reception of the Spirit.^{xxiii} Underhill argued that a lack of inner stillness is why most people's spiritual lives are so crude, shallow and vague.^{xxiv} Underhill encourages us to keep 'Eternity at our Centre' – that God-given joy and peace that can enable us to keep our feet in our unsteady times.^{xxv}

For many years I've prayed, 'What are You doing, God, and how can I join in?' Underhill encourages us to have the courage and generosity to participate in what the Spirit is doing, even if it's costly. As we give ourselves to God's redemptive action and cooperate with God – even when it's sacrificial or painful – we're enriched with a 'genuine share in that creative life of God which is always coming, always entering, to refresh and enhance our life.'^{xxvi} Given the Spirit is always seeking fresh channels through which to enter, refresh and cleanse the world,^{xxvii} the question becomes, how might we become channels? Perhaps what's essential is trustful adoration and a limitless self-offering in our lives of prayer, along with being open to the 'pressure' of the Spirit who accomplishes His creative work through us as we worship, intercede and serve.^{xxviii}

'Come'

This final phrase of the Creed calls forth the word, 'Come.' Come Holy Spirit – open our eyes so we can see what You're doing; open our ears so we can hear Your gentle whisper. And Come Lord Jesus – open our hearts that we might worship You in adoration. 'Your Kingdom come!'

How are we participating in the coming of the Kingdom? How are we looking for the life of the world to come? How might we as communities together engage in expectancy and hope-filled adoration of our Triune God who is drawing us towards the life of the world to come?

We believe in but we can't quite conceive that world that is to come, though at times it might feel rather near. Underhill invites us to have our lives ruled by a deep longing for God, constantly moving towards God, 'always moving towards that Country.'^{xxix}

- i Evelyn Underhill, *The School of Charity. The Mystery of Sacrifice* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1954), 101.
- ii Lucy Menzies, ed., *Collected Papers of Evelyn Underhill* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1949), 198.
- iii Revelation 4.8, NIV.
- iv Underhill, *School*, 103.
- v Psalm 103.15; 39.5.
- vi Underhill, *School*, 51.
- vii Underhill, *School*, 103.
- viii Underhill, *School*, 108.
- ix Underhill, *School*, 101.
- x Underhill, *School*, 104.
- xi Underhill, *School*, 109.
- xii Underhill, *School*, 108.
- xiii Underhill, *School*, 109.
- xiv Evelyn Underhill, *The Mount of Purification* (London: Longmans, 1960), 68.
- xv Hebrews 11.1, KJV.
- xvi Underhill *Mount*, 69.
- xvii Underhill, *Mount*, 68.
- xviii Underhill, *School*, 101-102.
- xix Underhill, *School*, 108.
- xx Underhill, *School*, 102.
- xxi Underhill, *School*, 102.
- xxii Hebrews 12.1.
- xxiii Grace Brame, ed., *The Ways of the Spirit* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 50-51.
- xxiv Brame, ed., *Ways*, 106.
- xxv Evelyn Underhill, *The Fruits of the Spirit, Light of Christ, Abba* (London: Longmans, 1960), 19.
- xxvi Underhill, *School*, 103.
- xxvii Underhill, *School*, 107.
- xxviii Underhill, *School*, 108.
- xxix Underhill, *School*, 110.

Podcast

A short podcast of Bishop Martin in conversation with others will be available on the Diocesan Website from Ash Wednesday.

This may help your individual reflection or group discussion on this theme.

It will be available on the Diocesan Website a week before Ash Wednesday.

Questions for reflection and discussion

- How are we participating in the coming of the Kingdom?
- How are we looking for “the life of the world to come?”
- As communities how might we “engage in expectancy and hope-filled adoration of our Triune God who is drawing us towards the life of the world to come?”
- Will you be more aware of the actual words of the Creed when reciting them in the future after our time together this Lent?

Some Hymn Suggestions

Be still my soul

Forty days and forty nights

Breathe on me breath of God