

# Matter 21

## Summary

Heaven is Hell

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## Report

You may be wondering why the reading today was the Sermon on the Mount.

My response threatens to be a long one, I'm afraid, but it's probably going to be my last for a very long time. I haven't really prepared it, but my memory remains keen. I've had something of a crisis of faith, you see, and I need you, my parishioners, my flock, to understand why.

Oh, I'd appreciate it if you didn't record this, by the way. It's just between us. Heaven knows what

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conspiracy theorists would say if they got hold of it. Thanks, thank you.

So it concerns this: my right hand. As many – in fact all, I think – of you are aware, I lost this hand to meningitis when I was a child. It appears to have – well, it *has* – grown back. It's a real hand. I went to sleep last night and when I awoke this morning, there it was.

I should be praising the Lord right now. It's clearly a miracle! Medical science can't grow hands on people overnight! I should be on the phone to the Bishop, telling him the wonderful news. I've been blessed with tangible proof that God exists! I ought to be appearing on TV news channels gratefully acknowledging with humility His grace.

I would be, too, if I'd simply woken up with my hand back on with no idea how it happened. I do know how it happened, though, and it's caused me to question everything I believe – believed – in. Now I'm not suggesting that *you* should also question your faith – it's fine if you want to call the restoration of my hand a miracle. I'm simply going to explain what happened from my perspective, and how it's shaken me so much, so you'll understand why, straight after today's service, I'll be applying for sabbatical leave effective immediately.

So, somewhat unusually, yesterday I found myself in Oxford with nothing to do. I'd gone there at short notice to conduct three back-to-back weddings, owing to the sudden illness of one of my colleagues. It transpired, however, that he was not

suffering from the onset of a rare, debilitating syndrome; his condition was entirely the result of over-indulgence precipitated by the Eat Out to Help Out scheme. Anyway, by the time I arrived he was once more hale and hearty, so I was no longer required to act as *locum tenens*.

I decided to make profitable use of this unexpected gap in my day by taking in the city and seeking inspiration for future sermons.

There was a small crowd in Radcliffe Square, outside the Bodleian – all socially-distanced, don't worry. A hand-made sign announced that this was a poetry reading. Now a poet – she was female, so I suppose I should say poetess – invariably has something interesting to say, if not necessarily in a manner immediately comprehensible to the non-poet; I therefore joined the audience in the hope that my mind might be stimulated.

The young woman must have already been performing for a while because, following a round of polite applause, she announced the title of her final reading: *Heaven is a Hell* – exactly the kind of subject matter for which I was hoping. I automatically brought to mind the passage in Luke 16:19-31 about the rich man and Lazarus, but as the poem progressed it seemed that she was making a rather more philosophical point. She argued that free-thinking isn't possible without suffering, and that because there is no suffering in Heaven there can be no free thought there, either. Therefore, she asserted, Heaven is a Hell.

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Her poetry was not of the highest order, but her perspective was new to me and rather intriguing. I resolved to give it some thought.

At this juncture, the man I had been standing closest to – good-looking he was, quite tall, possibly Spanish or Middle-Eastern, he had an odd accent – anyway, he asked what the poet meant by ‘Heaven’.

I was wearing my dog collar, so assumed that he knew I was a member of the clergy. I explained that she intended it as a metaphor for a place of perfection.

We then had a short exchange in which I had to clarify that Heaven is not imaginary. Rather it’s the place where God is, which, because God is everywhere, means Heaven is everywhere. This is why, no matter where you are, you can always let God into your heart. It’s a principle with which all of you, I’m sure, are familiar: Heaven is the state of having a full relationship with God.

Now you might have thought that this explanation would have satisfied the Middle-Easterner – whose name, by the way, I was later to learn was Marius – but he followed it up by asking who God was. The thought did occur to me that I was being wound up, but he genuinely – if improbably – seemed not to know.

I decided I’d better start at the beginning, so informed him that God was the creator of the universe. As if to check he’d understood me, he then asked if God was akin to the author of a novel,

and in the same way that an author pervades their books, so God pervades the universe.

This struck me as a very good way of explaining the Holy Spirit, and I was on the verge of launching into a discussion of the Trinity when Marius asked me if I wanted to *meet* Him – God, that is.

I told him I'd rather not meet my maker right now, whereupon he said he'd arrange it for that night.

I thought nothing of this, because to be honest, I was looking for a way to escape the conversation at this point – it had become increasingly obvious to me that Marius had psychological problems. Fortunately, he ended it himself: he announced that the poet – who was by now packing up her things – was his daughter and that he needed to speak to her. I found this hard to believe, as he couldn't have been much older than her – plus she was blonde and fair-skinned – but perhaps she was adopted. Anyway, as he strode forward, she did appear to recognise him – quite forcefully so. She looked dumbstruck, thinking back on it.

I took my leave and continued with my day, pleased that this odd conversation had furnished me with a second idea to mull over for a sermon.

I doubt that I shall ever deliver that sermon. I have been changed forever by the strange and, frankly, extremely disturbing events that occurred after I fell asleep that night.

What I'm about to describe is not a dream – people don't remember dreams at the level of detail

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I'll be going into. Neither is it made up – I would have strenuously avoided going anywhere near this subject matter given the choice.

I awoke shortly after I had nodded off. I didn't feel tired at all. What I did feel was profound shock and rising fear as I realised that my body was not my own. It wasn't even flesh and blood – it was metal and wires and some kind of rubbery plastic. It *felt* as if it was my body, but it *looked* like a machine. It was a horrifyingly disturbing experience.

I stared, perplexed, at my mechanical right hand. I could move it as easily as my left, even though my own hand was amputated 28 years ago. The memory of how to use it still held.

My mind was a warzone of unanswered questions. Where was I? What had happened to me? Was I dreaming a dream more vivid than any I had dreamt before? Was I a monster? Was I dead?

A woman spoke. I remember her words distinctly: "Welcome to reality, Dominic". Her accent was the same as Marius's.

Still fazed and afraid, I sat up on, well I suppose it was a robot bed or something, it was basically a metal slab. I looked at her.

She wasn't a machine, she was a hundred percent human – although different to any human I'd ever previously met. The most immediately noticeable – disconcerting – thing about her was her skin. It was a very dark brown, including the palms of her hands, but in places it looked like chalk, covered as it was in what had the appear-

ance of dandruff – flakes of dead skin. Periodically, she would unselfconsciously rub some off. There was, as a consequence, dust everywhere.

She introduced herself as Sarah. Unnervingly, although I could understand every word that she uttered, the sounds did not match her lip movements. It was as if I was watching a film dubbed into English from a foreign language.

I asked her if I was dead. It seemed a good idea to get the most pressing question out of the way as soon as possible.

She laughed and assured me I wasn't. Flakes of dead skin or whatever it was fell from her face as she did so.

She was quite short, and dressed in a black, ankle-length gown with grey sleeves so billowing that they almost looked like wings – think of a cassock with wide, surplice-style arm coverings. Her features were not representative of any ethnicity I'm familiar with: her eyes were round, her cheekbones high, her brow strong, her lips thick, her nose narrow. Her hair was chestnut, and so straight that it might have been ironed. She wore no jewellery or – unless that's what the white stuff was – make-up. I'd put her age at around thirty.

She explained that I was the guest of her employer, Marius – the man who had spoken to me at the poetry reading.

She kept calling where we were 'reality'. When I questioned this, she said that the translation

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system might have problems with proper nouns, so she'd switch to the "old words" for me. With that, Earth became *Dheghōm* and where we were was *Bhéwonom*. She said that people from Dheghōm needed a vessel to visit Bhéwonom and that my robot body was just such a vessel – the only one, in fact. When I asked her how far Bhéwonom was from Earth, she replied that the question made no sense. Dheghōm was one of many realities "below Bhéwonom".

I asked to speak to Marius, but she said it wasn't possible as he was "representing in" – not on, *in* – Dheghōm. She declared that this was very expensive and that my robot body was also very expensive, but that Marius was a very rich man. She was to take me to meet Paul, the creator of Dheghōm.

I did not have the sense that I was in Heaven, but thought I'd better ask if I was, all the same. Sarah replied that she didn't know what the people of Dheghōm called Bhéwonom, because very few people from Dheghōm had ever been "absented in Bhéwonom" – three or four, she thought, the last of whom had visited almost three weeks ago. I was the first she'd met.

OK, so at this point I should say something about time differences. Earth and Bhéwonom use the same clock, with sixty seconds to the minute, sixty minutes to the hour, twenty-four hours to the day, and so on. When someone from Bhéwonom is visiting Earth, or *vice versa*, time passes at the same rate for both. When no-one is visiting,



though, time on Earth passes much, much faster – something like a hundred thousand times faster. Shortly after the previous person from Earth had visited, its connection with Bhéwonom had somehow been severed, stopping all traffic between them. Earth had then run unfettered. The person who had last come to Bhéwonom had done so over four thousand years ago, Earth time.

This is already starting to sound very Science Fiction, I know. It doesn't improve.

Sarah led me out of the room, into a corridor. Robot body or not, I found walking easy. After a few turns, we arrived in what seemed to be a lobby. There were a dozen or so other people there, all with the same essential look as Sarah. Some were male, most were taller, some styled their invariably-straight hair longer or shorter, some had flatter or wider noses or thinner lips; there was quite a variety. All had the same skin complaint, though, and all wore ankle-length black robes with grey sleeves. An older man also had on a waist-length cloak. Everyone looked at me as if I was an object worthy of note.

I smiled, but couldn't tell whether my robot lips were actually smiling or not.

The lobby area looked like that of a Victorian gentleman's club, with wood-panelled walls and warm lighting. The floor was tiled rather than carpeted, which made sense given the copious quantities of chalky dust everyone produced.

Sarah took me outside.

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Now I'd like to say that it was raining, but 'rain' seems too faint a description of what was plummeting from the clouds. I've been in India during monsoon season, but Bhéwonom's rain was far, far more impressive. Raindrops were the size of marbles and – waterproof artificial body or not – standing in it was like being hit by a relentless barrage of shots from a thousand peashooters. The drops were so heavy that wind did nothing to them – they fell completely vertically. As drizzle is to rain on Earth, so rain was to the globules that were falling from the sky in Bhéwonom.

Sarah didn't seem in the least bit perturbed. She stood by the roadside and beckoned to me to join her.

Now one of the main features of Bhéwonom is that everything there is standardised. All buildings with a similar purpose look the same. All vehicles with a similar purpose look the same. All items with similar purposes to other items look the same, as if manufactured by a single factory with a worldwide monopoly. The black robes with grey sleeves weren't some kind of corporate uniform, they were just how clothes were. Everyone was dressed thusly, aside from robot-me.

We were standing on a street of modestly-tall buildings made of long bricks almost purple in colour. When I say 'long', they were perhaps twice the length of the bricks we use on Earth. The structures were also of a regimented appearance, although some did look to be older than others.

They all had wide double-doors painted black, which were to some degree sheltered by a short porch with a gently-sloping roof. Windows were inset and made of single sheets of thick glass. They had shutters on the outside. Overall, it brought to mind the principles of Georgian architecture: elegance and symmetry.

The road was busy, even though it was close to being a stream. All the cars looked the same, all the lorries looked the same, all the articulated trucks looked the same. Superficially, they resembled ours in profile, but end-on they had a roof shaped a bit like an upturned boat.

One of them stopped and we got in. There was no driver.

It waited for a gap in the traffic then set off.

Sarah's clothes were completely dry, as water-repellent as a duck. Her hair was soaked and lank, but she didn't seem to be bothered by it. Her dead skin, dampened, no longer looked white. It was nevertheless still peeling worse than mine did that time I forgot to put suntan lotion on in Peru.

She reached through a slit in her gown and produced something that looked like a chocolate bar but was green. As she scoffed it, she explained that the people of Bhéwonom had to eat more often than we do.

I asked her why her skin came off. She explained that it was a kind of biological mechanism for excretion, which "we didn't implement for Dhegh-

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ōm". She assured me that Dheghōm is a better place than Bhéwonom.

I had to concede that, weatherwise at least, she was correct.

I looked out through the vehicle's rainswept window. There were people about, all looking to be of the same ethnicity – if that's the right word – as Sarah and all wearing the same kind of robes. Some also had short cloaks and a very few had robe-length ones. I never found out the significance of this. The people would greet each other, sometimes stopping and chatting. No-one looked particularly miserable – in fact they all seemed quite jolly and friendly – friendlier than the denizens of Oxford, for sure.

Sarah told me that she was an engineer, whose job was making minds for robots. When I asked, somewhat worriedly, if she'd made my mind, she said no, it was beyond what any engineer had thought possible.

Now here's an important – and somewhat alarming – point. The people of Bhéwonom are not as clever as we are. Well, they sort of are – they're very methodical – but they don't think quite the same way as us. They don't see ahead like we do. It's all trial-and-error with them. Sarah was the Bhéwonom equivalent of a genius, yet she wasn't any smarter than I am – which, as I'm all too aware, isn't particularly smart at all. The wondrous technology they had – automatic language translation systems, hydrophobic – I think that's the

word – hydrophobic clothes, driverless cars, all of it had been designed incrementally. No-one had thought “how can we make waterproof clothes?”, they’d just thought “waterproof clothes would be good” and then over many years made small changes to clothes until they found some iteration that was waterproof. Thereupon, those were the clothes everyone wore. They think almost entirely in an evolutionary way, whereas we can also think in a revolutionary way.

Sarah was taking me to see Paul – the creator of Dheghōm – because Marius wanted to understand why the people of Dheghōm – us – are so much cleverer not only than the people of Bhéwonom but also than the people of the other realities beneath Bhéwonom that Paul and those like him had created. She informed me that Marius was a genius too, because most of the people of Bhéwonom wouldn’t have thought of doing such a thing.

It was around this time that I asked Sarah a question which had been troubling me from the start, but that I’d avoided because I was afraid of what the answer might be.

What had happened to my own body?

She told me that it was still intact. Paul couldn’t remove my mind from my body because of how Dheghōm works, but he *could* make it control a different body. While I was in charge of the robot-body in Bhéwonom, my Earthly body was effectively in a coma. It would come out of it when my mind was given back control, but the process

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would take a few seconds. If no-one but me was using the connection between Bhéwonom and Dheghōm, those few seconds would become a hundred hours on Earth. Sarah had sufficient foresight to recognise that this would not be ideal.

I think it was about then that she received a call. She pressed her forearm – there must have been a device or implant or something concealed beneath her sleeve – then she started talking. I only heard her side of the conversation, but the words – which now matched her lip movements – made no sense. The sounds were all ones a human being could utter, but their combination was some distance from any language I know. It was as if she was speaking in tongues.

I looked outside again. The car was trundling along at a steady pace, around forty miles an hour at a guess, and the rain was as relentless as ever. I could see buildings of a different kind now, all with signs on the outside; I couldn't read the writing, but supposed they were probably shops.

When I'd spoken to Marius, I'd taken the formal, theological line that Heaven was eternal life in our enjoyment of God. In explaining it, however, I had given him the impression that it was a physical reality in which a personal creator god dwelled. By some unknown marvel of technology, I now found myself in an artificial body on my way to visiting this supposed creator, whose name was apparently Paul.

I didn't believe for a moment that Paul was God, but was prepared to entertain the possibility that either he or Marius was the devil.

I also didn't believe for a moment that I was in Heaven – or in Hell, come to that. Neither is renowned for having rain that makes our rain seem a pale imitation. If it had been fire and brimstone, rather than water, then I might have been concerned, but it was just water. There was a pool of it by my feet and on the car seat.

Sarah switched her translation app back on and told me that the call had been from Paul. Apparently, he'd restored my missing hand.

I couldn't get my head round this at first, so she elaborated. My body in Dheghōm should have had two hands but Paul had noticed it only had one. He'd corrected that.

This is where I said the words that will define the rest of my life: "But what if I didn't *want* my hand back?"

Sarah looked at me in awe. She quickly explained that her reaction was because I'd asked her to use her imagination – "what if?". Very few people had ever done that. The Bhéwonom way was to try something that seemed positive then see what happened as a result. That's precisely what Paul had done with my missing hand.

I didn't want a conversation about imagination: I wanted my lost hand removed again. I tried to explain to her my reasons – that I've been missing a hand for so long now that being one-handed has

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become part of my identity, of who I am, but she was not sympathetic. She said that I was speaking as if imagining was easy, but for the people of Bhéwonom it wasn't easy. Very few of them possessed the ability to see the world as it *might* be to any high degree.

When I told her that on Earth even children can answer a 'what if?' question – sometimes, better than adults! – she seemed to grow in determination. She rubbed each cheek with the back of the opposite hand, which I took to be a sign that she was resolute.

"I must speak to Marius", she said. "I must visit Dheghōm and talk to the people there. I could learn so much!"

I asked what was stopping her.

The answer, in a nutshell, was money.

Paul was currently under a lot of pressure. News of the achievements of the people of Dheghōm had got out and some from Bhéwonom wanted its connection to be cut again so there would be new mathematics and science as soon as possible. Doing this would be very expensive, though, and Paul had little money left after the unscheduled interruption – she may have called it an 'attack', come to think of it – a couple of weeks earlier. Paul needed people to pay to visit Dheghōm to cover its running costs, but few people wanted to visit any more because they were afraid. As for why they were afraid, well to everyday Bhéwonom folk all progress is frightening to some extent because



predicting what will happen is difficult for them. The amount of progress promised by Dheghōm they found frankly terrifying.

Paul had inserted a probe in Dheghōm to discover and capture clips of what normal life there was like. He'd hoped this footage would demonstrate that Dheghōm presented no reason to be frightened, but the probe had shown such levels of self-awareness that it'd had the opposite effect. He would be trying again shortly in a more controlled setting.

In summary, then, Paul was reliant on the patronage of unafraid, wealthy people like Marius, but he couldn't allow them to visit Dheghōm – Earth – *all* the time because then we wouldn't race ahead of Bhéwonom and our new ideas would arrive too slowly for him to exploit.

I made the mistake of asking why he couldn't simply borrow the money for a month or so, until Dheghōm produced something exploitable in Bhéwonom.

"Borrow it? Borrow? Money?" Sarah had patently not encountered the concept before.

Recollecting the dim view that Christ took of money-lenders, I immediately regretted my question. With luck, Sarah will take some time to latch onto the idea of interest on loans, though, so Bhéwonom is safe from the worst excesses of capitalism for now. Still, I quickly moved on and asked why money from the visitors to the other

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'realities' Paul had created couldn't subsidise Dheghōm.

The reason turned out to be that these realities – seven in number – were just like so many others created by other people, therefore nobody would pay much to visit them. Paul's other creations were barely breaking even.

Yes, this does sound an awful lot like saying that Paul is but one god among many and that our universe is but one among the many he and they have created.

I concluded that what was needed was evidence that Dheghōm was exciting rather than frightening. Then, people would visit it.

While devouring another candy bar, Sarah concurred. However, she cautioned that if – she was proud of her use of the word – *if* Dheghōm became exciting then people might also want excitement elsewhere. This could change the nature of Bhéwonom's society. As such, it would lead to calls to close Dheghōm down.

She then dropped the bombshell that some people had already called for Dheghōm to be closed down, because they feared the changes it might bring to Bhéwonom. They'd almost succeeded, too.

I asked what she meant by "closed down".

She replied that she meant "switched off". The entire universe, gone in an instant, like turning off a lamp! Let there be light. Let there not be light.

Sensing that I wasn't happy with this possibility, she reassured me that it wouldn't happen.

Marius, being a rich and powerful genius, had successfully argued that his daughter in Dheghôm was a person because she could die, so Dheghôm would not be switched off while she lived. It would be murder if it was.

I pointed out with some energy that *everyone* on Earth is a person; that *I'm* a person.

Sarah said that this was what she thought, too, but that her opinion was considered biased because her job was making minds for robots.

I never saw any of the robots she made minds for, by the way, in case you were wondering.

Eventually, we arrived at the offices of Paul's company. Like all the others in its street, it was not as classy on the outside as the one owned by Marius. Each had only a single front door, with a large lintel rather than a porch.

Inside, the walls were of bare plaster, not wood. It was laid out in open plan, but there was a receptionist at a desk near the entrance. She was older than most of the twenty or so other people I could see, and although she wore the same kind of long gown as everyone else, the sleeves of hers were yellow. These were the only sleeves I saw during my time on – in, whatever – Bhéwonom that weren't grey; I never found out what the significance was.

The woman in the yellow sleeves was called Eve. She engaged in a short chat with Sarah but only said "Hello, Dominic" to me. I don't think she felt entirely comfortable speaking to a robot.

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Sarah led me past the others, whom – seated at desks as they were – I assumed were working. It was hard to tell, as they all had large pairs of goggles completely covering their eyes – I wasn't at all sure that they were even aware of my presence. They occasionally said things to one another, but they didn't turn their heads to do so.

Paul was in what Eve called "the machine room" – a large space full of metal cases the size of washing machines. There were coloured lights everywhere, some of which were flashing but most of which were steady. A man was sitting at a desk that was covered in switches. Behind him, large, circular displays resembling wheels were rotating radial lines at increasing speeds left-to-right, as if counting something.

The man at the desk was Paul. Sarah had told me he was easily startled, so she made a noise when she closed the door, to alert him to our presence.

He removed his goggles, turned around, and stood up to greet us.

If someone had told me yesterday that God was a thin-faced man in his early forties with dead skin all over his face except for a goggle-shaped outline surrounding his eyes, I would not have believed them.

I still wouldn't believe them, either. Whoever he is, Paul certainly isn't God. How could he be the creator of all things when he himself must have been created?

In any case, he introduced himself as the designer of Dheghōm, rather than as the creator. The construction work, he said, had been done by his team.

He was quite a serious person, and he kept his hands behind his back as he talked. I didn't find him personable; he was polite, but business-like.

He asked me a string of questions about Earth. Did I like it? Did I want more weather? Did I like how smell and taste were related? Were there enough colours? Did pain last too long? Was it a problem that I couldn't detect mass?

I replied to that last one with "You can detect mass?", which caused him some excitement. "Did you notice that conceptual leap?" he asked Sarah, in an understated way. "This is incredible."

Sarah drily reported that I did that kind of thing all the time, and that it was something all the natives of Dheghōm could do.

Playing along with the idea that Paul had indeed created Earth, I asked him why he'd designed a universe that the people of Bhéwonom would find frightening.

He told me that he hadn't done that. He'd designed a reality that was primitive and comforting which he'd hoped many people from Bhéwonom would like. Because its natives seemed to be more interesting than those of other realities, it had been quite popular. That had ended when some bad people had attacked the communications system and it had taken two full weeks to stop them.

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During that period, all eight of the realities he'd created had run at full speed, which wasn't intended to happen. Four and a half thousand years had passed in each of them during these fourteen Bhéwonom days. Only Dheghōm had advanced, however. The others were much as they were before. He and Marius wanted to know why.

"Let me show you", he said, and handed me his goggles – "viewers", he called them. They were covered in skin excretions, but as a robot I couldn't really ask him to clean them so I reluctantly put them on. They were attached to his console by a slightly-glowing cable, and he helped adjust them to fit my artificial face.

"This is Erwā", he said, whereupon it was as if I was standing in rough wilderness. A group of perhaps a dozen people – people who looked just like you and me – were sitting around a fire while animals – oxen – grazed nearby under the watchful eye of a man with a spear.

I looked down at my body. Clad in furs, it was human now, a mid-brown but with the palms of both hands – for I had two – a lighter tone.

The spearman glared in my direction and shook his weapon. He said something I didn't understand.

Another person materialised next to me. She was stunningly beautiful. Her furs were cut professionally, as if to form a suit made of bearskin.

The spearman backed off; I could see the fear in his eyes.

The besuited woman asked if I was new, to which I replied that yes, I was: Paul had put me there. This seemed to satisfy her.

She asked gestured towards the group and asked if "their numbers" were visible. When I replied in the negative, she produced a small pot from somewhere, the contents of which she asked me to drink. I took a sip – it tasted of Communion wine – then suddenly symbols appeared over the heads of the tribespeople. I couldn't read them, but they were all blue with a black border except for the one over the spearman's head, which was more purple. The plates all faced me, regardless of which way their bearers were oriented.

I turned to the woman who had given me the drink. Three-dimensional green symbols rotated halo-like above her head, but I couldn't decipher those either.

"Let me know if you need any help", she said, then dematerialised.

I'd no idea how I might go about letting her so know, but it didn't matter because at that moment Paul chose to say "This is Dheghōm".

I was in my bedroom. I only knew it was my bedroom because the digital clock, reading 01:37, produced just enough light to see by.

There, lying on my bed, fast asleep, was my body.

Both my arms were outside the covers. I had two hands.

I was repelled.

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I turned to the long mirror on the wardrobe door, to see what form I had taken here. Dim though the reflection was, I could tell that I looked the same as the body on the bed. There were two versions of me in that room, both of whom bore two hands. Neither mirror-me nor sleeping-me had a symbol above his head; I suppose they both might have done if someone had given me a magic potion to quaff.

Paul only let the nightmare run a few seconds more before returning me to Bhéwonom. As he removed my goggles, he explained that it was very expensive to visit two different realities like that.

I told him I wanted my right hand removed.

He told me I could chop it off.

I told him I wanted *him* to remove it. I would have great difficulty explaining to everyone – to *you* – how it had grown back.

I'd thought that this point might have persuaded him to acquiesce, but it did quite the opposite. The unknown possibilities opened up by my dilemma intrigued him, and he wanted to know how the people of Earth would react.

I tried a different tack, explaining that having a missing hand was part of who I was now. The condition had shaped my life and given me my calling. He was about to do something at the console "to change that", but Sarah stopped him. She reminded him that I was a person, and that altering my thoughts was immoral. He did seem to accept this assertion.



Sarah quickly changed the subject. She wanted Paul to tell her whether the people of Dheghōm asked more of his system than did the people of the other realities. He said yes, and there were many more of them than there used to be, too. Unvisited, Dheghōm now ran much slower than it did before, but the other realities ran at more or less the same speed.

She begged to be allowed to visit Dheghōm. Paul was amenable, but kept repeating that it was too expensive.

A bagpipe-like note droned from his console. He flicked a switch to silence it, then explained that shortly everyone would be kicked out of Dheghōm to allow it to run free. He should return me to my body forthwith.

Sarah was very frustrated, rubbing the backs of her hands together rapidly. She cursed the rain, because it had slowed us down. A sunny day would have halved the journey time.

Paul was once more at the console, goggles on. I would shortly be back in my own body, he said, then bade me farewell.

I had to ask. "Paul", I said. "If you created Dheghōm, who created Bhéwonom?"

"No-one did", he replied, bemusedly. "It's Bhéwonom."

Three and a half seconds of swirling confusion later, I was back in my body. This body, the one you see before you: the one with two hands.

## Dheghōm

So you now understand my problem. I have a completely truthful description of how my hand regrew, which is also completely unbelievable. You're looking at me as if I need to be locked up, and perhaps I do, but here, see? See this? This is a right hand! You *know* I don't have a right hand, you've seen the stump often enough, I've banged on about it in sermons often enough. Yet here it is! What am I to make of it?

Perhaps I *am* going mad. Perhaps God sent me this hand and the accompanying vision to test my faith. Why me, out of all humanity, though? I'm nothing special. Why choose me? What have I done that no-one else has done better or worse?

So that's it. That's the end of the sermon. I'll be cancelling the rest of my duties forthwith and arranging a *locum*. I'll see what the bishop has to say about how to proceed.

This isn't my hand. It's a hand attached to my body, but it's not my hand. I don't *have* a hand, I don't *want* a hand. It changes who I am.

Is Heaven perfection? I'm imperfect – but I wish to be imperfect.

Perhaps *that's* what has offended God so much.

As for why the reading today was the Sermon on the Mount, I refer you to Matthew, chapter 5, verse 30.

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## Notes

The audio of the sermon was recorded from the live stream by Mrs Collette Warrington, who is deaf, for the benefit of her husband, Mr Peter Warrington, who was in hospital at the time recovering from COVID-19. This transcript was made by their son, Dr Geoff Warrington.

Dr Warrington's phonetic representation of Dheghōm ("D'hay G'hawm") and Bhéwonom ("B'hay Woe-Name") have been replaced in this text by the proper nouns introduced in the work of Prof. Clive Phillips; the spelling of Erwā ("Ayrr a'Waa") is faithful to the same conventions.

The body of Reverend Dominic Hughes was found by his housekeeper 7 Sep 2020. The coroner concluded that he had suffered a mental breakdown and had bled to death overnight after making multiple attempts to hack off his right hand with a cooking machete.