

Our Advent sermons on the Four Last Things. After *Death* and *Judgement* we arrive at *Hell*. Of course, these days hardly anyone believes there is such a place as hell: it's just one of those throwbacks to medieval superstition – along with sin and judgement. The trouble is that these notions of Divine judgement and hell belong to the world of spiritual philosophy and moral seriousness. And our world doesn't *do* philosophy or moral seriousness. It *does* propaganda and the utilitarian calculus: life is about maximizing pleasure and avoiding pain.

That despised medieval Christianity taught that the highest compliment paid to humankind is that we are made in the image of God. And God commands of us moral seriousness. But what commandments are left today? Only *Don't get found out* and *Wear a condom*. But when we reject spiritual philosophy and moral seriousness we are simply telling God that we don't want to be formed in his image. We prefer the image of the consumer. Or the precious personal self with its human rights. But to reject the image of God is to will oneself to be less than human – and therefore to forfeit all rights. Because the whole idea of rights – as the word makes plain – belongs to that rejected world of moral seriousness.

Really, modern secular hedonists, consumers and precious selves with their rights and their right to make up their own minds – what mind? – regard the notion of hell as insulting, an offence to their self-esteem. But what if the ego is a delusion and self-esteem a fantasy?

When it comes to hell, earlier generations were neither so squeamish nor so stupid. Dr Johnson was at supper with Dr Adams and a few friends. He expressed his fear of hell. Mrs Adams said, *You seem, Sir, to forget the merits of our Redeemer*. To which the great man replied, *Madam, I do not forget the merits of our Redeemer; but our Redeemer has said that he will set some on his right hand and some on his left*.

I can tell you what the original hell is like because I have been there. In fact my wife and I have both been to hell and back, together. The original hell was the municipal rubbish tip on the outskirts of Jerusalem and its name in Hebrew is *Gehenna*. It smokes all the time and no doubt that is the origin of the notion of hell-fire. The Jerusalem women complained that it dirtied their household washing.

Hell is not necessarily a lurid, fiery place but boring, dull, devoid of inspiration; merely tedious. There was a man who found himself in such a hell. It didn't look too bad. There were a score or so people standing up to their waists in horse-muck drinking tea. The man thought, *Well I can put up with that*, until the devil's voice came over loud and clear, *All right, tea-break over: back on your heads*.

O there was the notice outside a church in the Los Angeles: *What is hell? Come early and hear our choir-practice*.

But hell is not a physical location. It is the condition of deliberately turning from God, or simply neglecting to look towards God. That is, hell is not a positive nastiness but a lack, a deprivation of all good. You recall those chilling lines in Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* when Faustus asks Mephistopheles:

Where are you damned? In hell ... How comes it then that thou art out of hell? And the devil replies, Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it. Think'st thou that I who saw the face of God and tasted the eternal joys of heaven am not tormented with ten thousand hells in being deprived of everlasting bliss?

I tell you the truth: the idea of God actually sending anyone to hell is only a figure of speech. We go to hell by our own choices. That is what moral seriousness means. We choose our own hells. God wills that all men should be saved and he has given us the commandments to enable this. And when we failed to keep the commandments, he sent his Son to die for our sins. But the world rejects Christ. We prefer our own sweet selves. That is hell. That is what Shakespeare means when he makes Richard III say: *Richard Loves Richard: that is I am I*

We are all a bit like Milton's Satan whose damnation was the result of his preferring to rule in hell rather than serve in heaven. Hell is simply wanting to live our lives without God. OK. One of the most chilling passages in the New Testament is where Our Lord says:

αψιται υμιν ο οικος υμων – *Your house is left unto you.* Because you have chosen to reject God, you're on your own. St Matthew adds the word, *desolate.*

There is a typical childishness and peevishness about our refusal to accept that we really are going to be held responsible. Modern theologians deny the existence of hell. In one particularly choice example of intellectual vacuity and self-importance – a book, by theologians, for God's sake! called *Objections to Christian Belief* - it is claimed that hell is *morally repellent symbolism.* In other words, a God made in the image of modern theologians would not be so ill-mannered as to send us to hell.

Besides there is something wildly silly about protesting that it's not nice of God to send us to hell if we've spent all our lives rejecting God. For hell is simply being without God. If we don't want to be with God down here on earth, why should we want to be with him up there in heaven? The choice is all ours. There is terrible truth in *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* We are all creating our picture in the attic, forming by our each and every action our character that will appear at the last.

St Thomas Aquinas told us that evil and hell are merely banal. Precisely. And we certainly have a taste of this already. So much of the world of mass culture that surrounds us is banal. It is shoddy, shallow and trivial. It rejects attention, effort and application. It is a refusal to concentrate, to stretch oneself, to put oneself under some pressure. We get a foretaste of hell in

the mass culture of popular entertainment and the obsession with shopping and celebs. The play-station. The obsessive texting. Facebook. In fact some people are not content to be only one precious little self. More and more are going on line and inventing another self for themselves – an avatar, rich and beautiful as a rule, who has all sorts of exciting adventures in cyberspace. This new game has already resulted in divorce proceedings being brought back down here in what used to be called *real life*. So much for the forbidding of graven images.

Tumid apathy with no concentration...distracted from distraction by distraction. God offers us eternal life with him. People prefer *lifestyle* instead. I imagine my own private hell as an everlasting series of *Midweek* with Libby Purves – that icon of inconsequentiality - getting excited about nothing in particular with her vacuous *studio guests*; telling us in thrilling tones that, whereas somebody so famous you've never heard of her used to wash her hair on a Wednesday, now she does it on Thursday instead.

When you want a working definition of hell, think of its opposite. Its opposite is wholehearted commitment, the life of the alert mind and the quickened soul. The mystical theologians knew that the secret of blessedness is to attend to something; in a word to concentrate. And it is the avoidance at all costs of this attentiveness which is the hell of the modern age. A bit of escapism is fine now and again; but when everything is a form of escapism you have lost your soul – and that's the traditional definition of hell, isn't it?

God wants us to escape hell and enjoy something more wholesome. Jesus said, *I am come that ye might have life, and have it more abundantly*. More about this next week when we think of heaven.