

In our Advent series on The Four Last Things we move from Death and Judgement to thoughts about Hell. Most people today would regard this subject as rather quaint. And they would be offended by the very concept of Hell – *Primitive* and *medieval* and *superstitious* as it is. And now that no one accepts the Ten Commandments any longer, what might you possibly be sent to hell for? Hate crimes, putting your waste in the wrong re-cycling bin, global warming denial, criticising Bob Dylan, Michael Jackson and John Lennon. The Bible says that we deserve punishment for our sins. But what's left of sin these days? What used to be regarded as mortal sins are now only lifestyle choices.

But let's leave the Bible out of this for a minute and consider simple logic. If we cannot speak of sins any longer, then neither can we speak of virtues. If no one is ever to blame for anything, then praise is impossible too. The very idea of success must include the idea of failure. These are correlative opposites. Where there is not the possibility of punishment, the idea of rewards is meaningless. Unless, of course, you speak for the Department of Education which says that all shall run and all shall win prizes: in fact, at a pinch, prizes will be awarded even to non-runners.

But God said, through his prophet Moses, *See, I have set before thee this day life and good, death and evil, therefore choose good that thou mayest live.* So morality is not just a matter of opinion: there are very definite acts which are good and others which are evil. And both involve consequences. So next time you come across a coterie of moral relativists,, spiritualised vegetarians and wafflers about human beings' essential goodness, call to mind Chesterton's demolition of the essential amorality of this mindset. He said,

*A sort of Theosophist said to me, "Good and evil, truth and falsehood, folly and wisdom are only aspects of the same upward movement of the universe". Even at that stage it occurred to me to ask, "Supposing there is no difference between good and bad, or between false and true, what is the difference between up and down?"*

Or again in anticipation of our own age of non-judgementalism and political correctness, he said:

*A whole generation has been taught to talk nonsense at the top of its voice about having "a right to life" and "a right to experience" and "a right to happiness". The lucid thinkers who talk like this generally wind up their assertion of all these extraordinary rights by saying that there is no such thing as right and wrong.*

There are those around today – materialists and many biologists – who don't just deny the reality of good and evil: they deny that we have the freewill to choose even if there were such things. They say all our actions are determined by our genetic makeup and by the world of

material causation. This is instantly disproved by looking at the way we actually live our lives. Even the most dogmatic materialist believes that he is exercising a genuine choice when he decides to go to the pictures rather than the pub. I suppose even Richard Dawkins expects his wife to keep her marriage vows. Chesterton again said:

*There could be no better example than this queer appearance of the determinist as a demagogue, shouting to a mob of millions that no man ought to be blamed for anything he did because it was all heredity and environment. Logically, it would even stop a man in the act of saying, "Thank you" to somebody for passing the mustard. For how could he be praised for passing the mustard, if he could not be blamed for not passing the mustard? If determinism makes no difference, why should the determinist thunder from his pulpit about the difference it makes?*

The whole of our lives – all we regard as the most important things in life – require us to believe in the reality of good and evil and of our ability to make free choices concerning them. We admire courage, generosity, kindness and we are ashamed of cowardice, meanness and cruelty. There is a foolish notion that what is most reliable, most secure, is scientific knowledge and that moral laws are infinitely variable. But the reverse is true: science changes all the time with fresh discoveries which falsify earlier theories; but the moral law as expressed in the Ten Commandments is absolute and fixed forever. You might, for instance, one day in our quantum future, travel faster than the speed of light. But no one could ever claim that theft and murder are virtues.

Well, after clearing the ground somewhat, I have some good news for you: God does not send anyone to Hell. Those who go there go of their own choice. We know this is true because we see it all around us. Hell is not something that starts after we have died. Hell is all around us. Whenever someone chooses evil rather than good, he enters Hell. Remember Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*. When Mephistopheles appears, Faust asks him why he isn't where he belongs – in Hell. And Mephistopheles 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 joy of heaven, am not tormented with ten thousand hells in being deprived of everlasting bliss?*

Everlasting bliss is the realm of perfect goodness. But is that what you want? Because we are flawed, imperfect creatures, our attitude to everlasting bliss is ambiguous. Like the man who asked after the whereabouts of the spiritualist medium's daughter, not knowing that the girl had died. And the spiritualist replied, *Actually, she's enjoying everlasting bliss – but I wish you wouldn't speak about such unpleasant things!*

*See, I have set before thee this day life and good, death and evil, therefore choose good that thou mayest live. We have the God-given capacity to choose life, but so often we choose the things that lead to death: we make the choice in favour of Hell. God has created us with freewill*

and the one thing he will not do is stop us from exercising it. So we choose the culture of death, if we choose evil, that is if we take the Hell option, then we are free to go there. In fact, like Mephistopheles, we are there already.

Of course, being imperfect creatures, we all make mistakes. We don't live up to our own standards for ourselves. That's all right. God allows for this. There is confession and forgiveness. But if we deliberately and persistently choose evil, then we manufacture our own Hell here on earth and hereafter. We all like to be comfortable, have enough money to enjoy ourselves. Fine. But if we set our heart on making money, if money takes pride of place in everything we do, we have turned away from God. Or again, there are sensual pleasures and we are meant to enjoy them. We are not meant to crave immediate sensual satisfaction all day long. If we do so seek it, we are making our own Hell on earth. For instant satisfaction leads to greater craving for more. We hear of drug addicts. We hear of sex addicts. Morbid fascination with transient pleasures leads only to the frustration described by C.S. Lewis as *an ever-increasing craving for an ever-decreasing pleasure*. Or, as that noted moral philosopher Mick Jagger said, *I cain't get no satisfaction*.

We are not to fall into the opposite trap of Puritanism. Abstinence for its own sake can become a form of addiction, a form of self-obsession. Masochism too is a form of self-obsession. As David Frost told us ages ago of *the man who liked to take a cold shower: so he took a warm shower*. There are great dangers in obsessive abstinence, the hair shirt and in whipping oneself too much. These things can become just another variety of that attention to one's own feelings, constantly monitoring our senses and reactions. This is a particular Hell of modern times, when the question always asked first is, *How did you feel?* Our culture of touchy-feeliness arises when we turn from our duty to God and our neighbour and concentrate all our attention on self-satisfaction. There was even a programme on Radio Four this week called *Me-time* complete with in house psychologist and woman's magazine editor. This is Hell. As Shakespeare makes the King say, *Richard loves Richard: that is I am I*.

Hell is not, as Jean Paul Sartre, said, *other people*. Hell is self-regard taken to the limit of self-obsession. How to escape our private Hell then? Our Lord told us the proper place of wealth and pleasure; *Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and all these things shall be added unto you*. God and his laws for our good should be the first call on our time and talent. Then you can be at home in the good things of the earth which God has given us. St Augustine puts this beautifully: *Love God and do as you like*.