

## Sermon Hell 2010

After *Death* and *Judgement* we come to the third of *The Four Last Things* which is *Hell*. When we were children, we were taught that if you're good you go to heaven and if you're bad you go to hell. Later we learn that things are not so simple. There was once a very holy and righteous old priest. He lived to a great age and lost all his teeth and took on a very battered and decrepit look – a bit like your present Rector. Eventually, he died and in the afterlife he was seen with a sexy and scantily-dressed young model on his knee. Someone came up and asked him: *I suppose she's your reward for being so holy?* The priest said nothing, but the young model replied, *No – he's my punishment!*

If you believe the traditional doctrine of hell, in the first place you have to believe there is a life after death. I don't like the word *afterlife*. It's too much like *afterthought*. But surely the Bible teaches us there is a life beyond death? Not for most of the Old Testament it doesn't. Certainly not for the *Torah* – the first five books from *Genesis* to *Deuteronomy*. Why is this? Because the Israelites had just spent four hundred years in captivity in Egypt. And the Egyptians worshipped death. You may have seen the exhibition at The British Museum about *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. If you've listened to *The Magic Flute* you've come across the Egyptian gods of the underworld, *Isis* and *Osiris*. For the Egyptians, life itself was merely a preparation for death: death is the meaning and purpose of the pyramids.

The Israelites were appalled by this outlook. When they escaped from Egypt, they escaped also from the Egyptian obsession with death. But the Israelites went to the other extreme and believed there was nothing after death except a gradual fading away into a condition they described as *Sheol* or *The Pit*. They thought that when you were dead, you were next to nothing. As the Psalmist says:

*Free among the dead, like unto them that are wounded and lie in the grave: who are out of remembrance and are cut away from thy hand. Thou hast laid me in the lowest pit: in the place of darkness and in the deep.*

But religious thought and belief does not stay the same: because of God's progressive revelation, it develops. And it is informed by experience. So by the second century before Christ, when the Jews were being persecuted by Antiochus Epiphanes, they had formed a vision of a life after death to compensate for the pains and sorrows of life on earth. They came to believe in a final judgement and in heaven and hell. So there was a new word for hell. Not *Sheol* but *Gehenna*. *Gehanna* was once the valley where pagans sacrificed children to the god Moloch. By the time of Jesus, *Gehenna* was the name for the smoking rubbish tip outside Jerusalem. The Jewish women used to complain that it dirtied their washing.

There may be a hell after death. Many Christian theologians, including St Thomas Aquinas, thought there is such a place but Aquinas added, *There's probably no one in it*. While some Christian scholars believe hell is necessary because the moral law demands punishment for wickedness, others say that the existence of hell would be the defeat of the grace and love of God. These theologians say that all will be forgiven in the end and no one will suffer everlastingly. This doctrine became very popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Eternal damnation was particularly denied in a book called *Essays and Reviews* which came out in 1860 – a year after Darwin's monkey book, *The Origin of Species*. Some Evangelicals took the authors of *Essays and Reviews* to the law courts for denying what seemed to them the clear word of God. But the writers of *Essays and Reviews* were acquitted. A wit at the time said: *The Lord Chancellor has dismissed hell with costs and taken away from orthodox members of the Church of England their last hope of everlasting damnation*.

Whether there is hell after death may be a lively debate, but there is certainly hell on earth and most of us go through it at one time or another. When we are suffering pain and sorrow, we must remember that Jesus suffered these things too, and we must pray for our faith to be strengthened. In practical terms this means what Winston Churchill advised: *When you're going through hell, keep going*.

If you want to know about hell there is a higher authority than your parish priest. You should read Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the first part called *Inferno*. And it *is* a comedy. For example, Dante makes the punishments meted out to sinners ironically fit their crimes. Thus fortune tellers are made to go through hell with their heads facing the wrong way – so that they will mislead themselves as they had previously misled others. Satan is given a hideous triple face for his attempt to supplant the Blessed Trinity. Dante also names many of his famous contemporaries and allocates them their places in hell. Just for fun, you could play the game of identifying which of our contemporaries should be in which circles of hell and devise appropriately humorous punishments for them.

Dante divides hell into upper hell and lower hell. Upper hell houses those sinners whose offences are not regarded as the most serious. These are the gluttons, the drunkards the lazy and the sexually promiscuous. Dante knew these are not the worst things you can do. Then, halfway down, come the heretics who inhabit the hellish city of Dis, beloved of all crossword addicts. But lower down than the gluttons, the fornicators and even the heretics, are those whom Dante describes as *malicious* and *bestial*. These, the worst sinners of all, are those who have lied and misappropriated money – money rightly belonging to other individuals or institutions. These for Dante are the most contemptible, the very lowest of the low: people who defraud their neighbours and who are so far gone into selfishness that they see no wrong in their cheating..

So long as they get away with it. These malicious and bestial creatures, these money-grabbing fraudsters, are those for whom the lowest circles of hell were designed.

And here we touch on the true nature of hell. It is self-absorption. As Shakespeare says, hell consists in *Richard loves Richard: that is, I am I*. And in his play *The Cocktail Party*, Eliot has these lines:

*What is hell? Hell is oneself. Hell is alone, the other figures in it merely projections.*

That is, for the fraud and the money cheat, other people are only commodities to be exploited. That is why it is so grave a sin.

C.S. Lewis said that the gates of hell are locked *from the inside*. We ourselves turn the keys. We are our own gaolers. For hell is the failure to love. Hell is the refusal to love, the rejection of love. The obsession with self, and, worst of all as Dante says, a self on the make at that. I will end with another passage from C.S. Lewis which explains this to us:

*There is no safe investment. To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping your heart intact, you must give it to no one, not even an animal. You can wrap your heart carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket — safe, dark, motionless, airless — it will change. Your heart will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell. I believe that the most lawless and inordinate loves are less contrary to God's will than a self-invited and self-protective lovelessness. We shall draw nearer to God, not by trying to avoid the sufferings inherent in all loves, but by accepting them and offering them to Him; throwing away all defensive armour.*

For God is love and nothing else.