

Trinity VI Hell

There have been a couple of occasions on recent Sundays when Matthew has given Jesus the immortal phrase “weeping and gnashing of teeth”. It’s very tempting for tenderhearted souls such as mine to hurry over the words but there they are and they can hardly be ignored or edited out.

The phrase reminded me of a chance remark I made on the Feast of the Ascension. It was a quotation from a priest leading a retreat over 25 years ago. It went something like this: “as orthodox Christians we must believe in the existence of hell; the only question is, is anybody there?” It’s one of those comments that can be either shocking or liberating – maybe both.

It certainly stuck in my mind and it has come back to me with those recent passages from Matthew and, in very different circumstances,

thinking about the recent awful goings-on in Norway.

We must believe in the existence of hell but is anybody there?

Now depending on your nature, upbringing and faith you will probably come up with a variety of answers to the question and that, let me say right away, is perfectly OK. There are legitimate differences of opinion that jostle for attention both for the theologians and for the rest of us.

But there are other questions. What does hell look like? For Jesus it seems to be a place of regret and frustration much of the time. Weeping and gnashing of teeth doesn’t seem to me like the sort of thing you’d do if you were suffering never-ending agonies and torments. For other writers the idea of eternal punishment is rather more acute and painful.

Most Christians these days, if they try to define hell at all, tend to talk about a place where God is absent or where we are separated from God. We really can't be certain any more than we can be certain what heaven is like. We tend to talk in images that echo the good things of this world. We cannot know either way.

But the first question stands. Is anyone there?

Put it another way. If hell exists as a place as real as heaven how do we get into it and how do we separate ourselves from God? That, for me, is the real question here. We can speculate endlessly about what it might be like but the really important thing is how we get in and how we prevent ourselves from ending up there.

Let me nail my colours to the mast on one thing. I don't believe that only Christians go to heaven and that, therefore, everyone else goes elsewhere. It was a battle I had to fight

with myself and some other Christians at school and early on at university.

It was, funnily enough, the death of my grandfather – who was the most nominal of Christians – that ended the struggle. I knew that those Christians I was arguing with would have my granddad straight into hell and that, in my grief, would not do. I experienced a very liberating anger with that sort of thinking and never looked back. But... does anyone, therefore, end up in hell? The question keeps coming back.

The answer, I think, lies in two words. Relationships and Truth.

Centrality of relationships in human life

So with God – seeking a relationship with us primarily WE believe, by revealing himself in Jesus but in many other ways too... world, beauty etc

We are free to reject or repudiate for that must be what free will involves.

Maybe, then, the absence of a relationship with God in ANY form could be a means of avoiding God in the afterlife.

More central, however, is TRUTH

God is the ultimate truth since God has created everything that is true.

Surely, then, if we can't recognize the truth about ourselves the chances are that we can't see the truth about God or anything else?

Might it be that a self-deluded person of faith is in greater danger of not recognizing the truth about God than an honest, self-aware atheist?

Could it be that a repentant murderer – recognizing the truth about him or herself – is better placed to live with the loving and forgiving God than one of the murderer's self-righteous victims.

I can only imagine that after death we are confronted with the truth about ourselves and about God. Surely the only way could batter our way into hell – into a place of separation from God – would be by being so sure about ourselves and our rightness and so sure that God either does not exist and so closed minded about it, that we simply cannot see the truth before us.

Surely the only way we can escape God's love and forgiveness is to refuse to recognize it.

If there are such human beings then maybe they are in their self-righteous hell but we might be shocked and surprised to know whom we might be rubbing shoulders with in heaven – if we are openhearted and open-minded enough to recognise it when WE see it.

The only way I can populate hell is by believing in a God who stops being loving and forgiving towards us when we die. I don't believe in such a God. Getting into hell must

be hard work – taking a lot of determination and pride on our part. Looking at the world I could believe there are people who fit that description but in the face of God’s love how many would condemn themselves to an eternity of absence from such love.

I leave you to think and decide. But only on your own account. Leave everyone here and everyone else to God’s loving purposes.

Amen