

Twenty-sixth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Homily 1. Hell

There are a number of themes in today's reading. As today has been chosen as Social Justice Sunday we should pay special attention to the Second Reading from James. However, since today's Gospel is the only time hell is mentioned in Mark's Gospel, I have decided to reflect with you on the Church's teaching on hell.

The first thing to note is that 'hell' is a place. If I were to say 'Auschwitz', you would know that I was referring to a town in Poland. But, because of something that happened there, you would also think of the Shoah (Holocaust). The name 'Auschwitz' is linked in our psyche with the dreadful genocide perpetrated by the Nazi regime. Similarly, we know that Gallipoli is a beach in the Dardanelles (Turkey). But, because of what happened there in 1915, it speaks of Australian nationalism. In the same way 'hell' refers to a place. Jesus was referring to the valley to the south of Jerusalem, the valley of the Hinnom clan (Ge Ben Hinnom, Greek 'gehenna'), translated into English as 'hell'.

Jesus is begging his listeners (and the Church in choosing this Gospel is repeating his words to us) to take their life seriously. It matters that we know God as love. It matters that we 'live and live to the full' (John 10:10). That is the mission given to Jesus by God. It matters that we don't waste our life, or throw it away. Of course we are not meant to take the examples Jesus gives literally. He is not asking us to tear our eye out. But he is saying that sin is a dreadful thing. It blocks love. This can happen bit by bit, but it is also possible for us to stubbornly and determinedly reject love, thus creating hell for ourselves and for others.

Jesus points to the valley to the south of the city because of what happened there. In 587BC something undreamed of happened: Jerusalem, the city the inhabitants thought of as God's city, was razed to the ground. The king and everyone who was anyone were carted off into exile in Babylon, and God's temple was destroyed. Leading up to this catastrophe, people reverted to their primitive instincts, even to sacrificing their children to the Moabite god, Molech (see 2Kings 23:10). In the valley were the fires of the besieging army. The blood of those massacred when the city collapsed flowed down into the valley. Bodies of the fallen lay there (see Jeremiah 7:32-33), in a fever, their wounds suppurating (see Isaiah 66:24: 'their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched' – quoted by Jesus in today's Gospel).

The dreadful experiences associated with the valley fixed it in the people's psyche as a symbol of how a people can self-destruct if they lose their spirit and indulge in foolish alliances with the surrounding powers, some living in luxury while others starve, failing to live the covenant with God that was their reason for being.

This is the meaning of 'hell'. God is the only source of love. If we reject God's love we create our own hell. God, being Love, cannot force love upon us. If we die stubbornly rejecting love and locked into a hell of our own making, God will not stop loving us, but we can lock ourselves away from love and choose to reject God's love eternally. Of course it is not part of our faith that anyone has done this. Our faith does require of us that we believe that there are people living beyond death in communion with God – saints, officially recognised and not officially recognised.

We are not asked to believe that anyone has ever finally rejected love. Jesus is warning us of the possibility and begging us to choose life, for we can drift into or choose 'hell'.

There was a serious error in the teaching that some of us received in relation to hell. We were taught that God sends people to hell as a punishment for their bad behaviour. The parable of the last judgment could lead us to think this way if we forget that it is a parable in which Jesus reminds people of the way human beings behave, in order to make a point. The king in the story does send the wicked off for punishment. We are not meant to see the king as a stand in for Jesus.

The point of the parable is that in the final analysis our lives stand or fall on how we have or have not loved. Hell is not a punishment inflicted by God. It is self-inflicted. The Catholic Catechism puts it well: 'To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from God for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed is called "hell".' (n. 1033).

The choices we make matter. It matters how we live, how we relate to others, how we forgive, how we open our hearts to other's love and how we learn to love others. It matters that we welcome God's grace which enables us to 'love one another as I (Jesus) have loved you' (John 15:12). Our life here, and beyond death, depends upon it.

Homily 2. Prejudice

The readings of today's Mass focus on prejudice. The First Reading is set in the context of Moses selecting seventy elders to take over some of his responsibilities of governing the people during their journey through the wilderness. The Spirit of God comes down on the seventy elders in a scene that is reminiscent of an ordination ceremony. However – and it is here that prejudice raises its ugly head – it is discovered that the Spirit has also come down upon two men in the camp. When Joshua hears of it, he insists that Moses put a stop to it because the two men concerned were not among the seventy officially chosen and they had not been part of the 'ordination' in the tent. The response of Moses is quite wonderful, and surely we are to learn from it: 'If only all the people were prophets and God would pour out his Spirit on them all!' Moses knows something of the universal love of God. He is not about limiting God's power or maintaining an elite clique. The whole world is God's. Would it not be wonderful if everyone were filled with God's Spirit and spoke God's word.

How slow we are to learn this lesson is demonstrated in the Gospel in which John tries to get Jesus to stop a man who is calling on the name of Jesus to bring healing and liberation to people. John wants him stopped because, as he says: 'he is not one of us'. Jesus' response is immediate: 'Do not stop him!' Like Moses, Jesus is not interested in defending the rights and privileges of a specially chosen group. Rather, he is delighted that people are finding healing and freedom.

I thought we might reflect in turn on three of the main causes of prejudice: ignorance, greed, and fear. I suppose the main cause is ignorance. If people really knew you - your deepest thoughts, your fears, your hopes, your pain, your best desires, your good intentions, the addictions against which you are fighting – then they would share in God's love for you. They'd see that even when you behave badly, for the most part you are doing your best. And when you are not, they would know, as God knows, that you are not helped by being made an outsider.

Only love can help us believe in our true selves and change for the better. If we are prejudiced against people, it is a sign that we do not know them as they really are. In Jesus' day, people were prejudiced against Samaritans, against Gentiles, against tax collectors, prostitutes and lepers – and look how Jesus related to them! If we are going to be disciples of Jesus we had better examine our conscience to see how we speak about and act towards people who are not 'one of us'!

If, in the past, when people were more locked into their own racial groupings, there were grounds for this ignorance of people of different colour, race or religious customs, today we cannot make the same excuses. We have looked back at the earth from space and have seen it as a beautiful planet. It has been dramatically demonstrated that we do, indeed, belong to each other. We need each other. Moreover, just as an orchestra is enriched by the variety of instruments that make it up, and as a garden is made more beautiful by the variety of plants and flowers that grow in it; just as a cathedral window produces such awe because of the variety of colours through which the light is filtered; so we should recognize the immense gift of the many cultures that make up Australia.

The terrible injustices that flow from greed are highlighted in today's Second Reading from the Letter of James. This is a vice that has grown exponentially in the modern world. James is complaining about the injustices that he found in the Christian community in the middle of the first century. He could never have imagined the greed and the consequent injustice that bedevils our world today.

There is hardly any need to speak about fear, since governments, especially in countries which defend their unjust share in the world's limited resources, are using fear as a political tool. Not a day passes without mention of terrorism, but how many care to heed the words of Kofi Annan in a 2003 address to the United Nations: 'Terrorism groups may actually be sustained when ... governments cross the line and commit outrages themselves.' Terrorism does not occur in a vacuum – a point made by Avraham Burg, a former speaker of the Israeli parliament, speaking out against the moral blindness of the policies of Israel towards the Palestinians.

In the Gospel Jesus gives us a severe warning. Life is precious and we can destroy it - not just here and now and in passing, but eternally. We can, if we are stubborn and senseless enough, throw the gift of life back in God's face and kill our soul. We can choose the hell of being forever unable to relate to God. Here we can distract ourselves for a while from the implications of this. People can be so self-focused that we can be blind to who it is that is breathing life into us and inviting us into love. But not so in the existence that opens up for us at death. Then we shall see things as they really are. Hell is the experience of one who has knowingly and willingly, obstinately and persistently, chosen to kill his or her soul.

This is a terrible warning about the importance of life and the sacred responsibility we have to nurture it. The warning is not to those whom others considered outsiders. It is given against those who would undermine others, who would fail to see the sacredness of others, who would drive others or entice others along the same sinful, destructive path as themselves. Let us not make life harder for others. Let us offer them a cup of water to quench their thirst. We are not asked to give what we do not have, but no one can stop us loving, even though it may appear that we can love only in apparently tiny, insignificant ways.

Today we celebrate the feast of Saint Vincent de Paul who lived as a parish priest in Paris in the first half of the seventeenth century. Frederick Ozanam, founder of the society of the Vincent de Paul has been beatified. These men understood Jesus' message. They didn't know as much as we know about the terrible injustices that happen every day on this globe, but they knew better than we that God's love is everywhere and that God has given a share of Jesus' Spirit to us all, and that we can all make a difference, if we listen for God's inspiration and reach out in love in little ways, starting where we are. Frederick Ozanam could never have foreseen the worldwide effects of the small beginnings.

Surely the first Pentecost teaches us to embrace differences. As we celebrate the Eucharist today and watch the arms of Jesus on the cross reach out to embrace the whole world, let us re-commit ourselves to work for justice with courage and with hearts filled with love.