

16th Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

We sometimes hear the claim that there is no hell and that those who die separated from God simply cease to exist. No suffering, just an end to consciousness. The argument is that God would have to be a monster to punish sinners for all eternity. This claim contradicts the constant tradition of the Christian community and represents a radical misunderstanding of the Church's teaching on hell. That the church's teaching on hell is misunderstood is itself not all that surprising, as it has often been badly presented by preachers intent on using fear to achieve conformity.

In all teaching we have to distinguish between the essential truth and the imagery used to convey this truth. Prior to the time of Jesus, and right through to our own time, the main image used in connection with hell is the image of fire. Jesus himself uses it on a number of occasions. He warns us that if we treat people with contempt we will be 'liable to the hell of fire' (Matthew 5:22). In his parables he likens the wicked to weeds that are thrown into the 'furnace of fire where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matthew 13:42, 50). He warns us against putting obstacles in the way of others in their journey to God. If we find that we are doing that, Jesus warns us in clear graphic imagery: 'If your hand or your foot or your eye causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame or blind than to have two hands or two feet or two eyes and to be thrown into the eternal fire' (Matthew 18:8-9; see Mark 9:43,48). When describing the Last Judgment, Jesus says that those who failed to love will be told: 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire' (Matthew 25:41).

It is clear that Jesus takes very seriously the eternal consequences of our sin. In speaking of fire, however, he is simply expressing his warning in traditional imagery. The point he is making, and the essential pain of hell is expressed in the words 'Depart from me!' Paul sums up the teaching of the Newer Testament when he writes: 'Those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might' (2Thessalonians 1:8-9).

We find this teaching in the Catholic Catechism: '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 chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God in whom alone we human beings can possess the life and happiness for which we were created and for which we long' (n.1035). 'It is not God's prior will for anyone to go to hell. To go to hell, a willful turning away from God (mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end ... The Church implores the mercy of God who does not want 'any to perish, but all to come to repentance' (2Peter 3:9)' (n.1037).

There is no kindness in glossing over the awfulness of sin and the terrible effects it can have upon us, effects that do not stop with death. We would not consider it loving if a parent, wishing not to frighten a child, hid from that child the consequences of taking heavy drugs. Of course you want to warn them because you do not want to see them throwing away their life in self-destruction. For the same reason, Jesus speaks very clearly of hell. We shall reap what we sow

(Galatians 6:7-8), and Jesus wants us to sow well for he longs for us 'to live and to live to the full' (John 10:10).

The Newer Testament speaks of God as a judge passing a sentence of punishment on the sinner. This image is borrowed from the Older Testament and from traditional court practice. The essential point being made is that what we do really matters and that while we might fool ourselves and others, we cannot fool God. God sees what is and judges or declares things to be the way they really are. It is a terrible distortion of the truth, however, to imagine God as a petty tyrant who is so offended by our sins that he gets us back by hurling us into a fire for all eternity. This goes against everything Jesus ever revealed to us about God.

Jesus reveals God as a God of love. But love is not something that over-rides human freedom or that changes us against our will. To reject love has consequences which we cannot pretend away. Hell is something we do to ourselves. In the words of the catechism it is 'definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed'. We are made for love. We are made for truth. God, who holds us in being, is constantly gracing us, drawing us towards him in ever closer communion. If we resist God's grace, if we fly in the face of truth, if we obstinately and determinedly act in ways that are self-destructive and destructive of others, if we are unfaithful and unloving and grasping, and if we continue to resist the love that is calling us to change, we might be able to live a make-believe life here, distracting ourselves from the truth, but at death we will be unable to run away any more or escape into distraction. The reality of our decisions will stare us in the face, and we will be unable to avoid suffering the consequences of our choices. The key pain of hell is that of being eternally separated from the object of our longing and loving. The essence of hell is being separated from God and so from love.

Those of us who have experienced being separated from love here know something of the suffering that this brings to our heart, our mind and our body. Here we might succeed in anaesthetising ourselves from pain. We can hide from the truth. It might be comfortable to think that we can do what we like here on earth, abuse others, get the young hooked on death-dealing drugs, smash marriages, deceive and victimise anyone we fancy, kill others because of their race or religion, or just for our own perverted pleasure and sense of power, and then on death just walk out on everything we have done into oblivion. However, against such wishful thinking stand the words of Jesus and the teaching of the Church.

Today's First Reading (Wisdom 12:13,16-19) stresses God's parental concern. We are reminded that he 'cares for everything' is 'lenient to all' and 'mild in judgment'. He has given us hope because after sin he offers the grace for us to repent. In similar terms the Responsorial Psalm (Psalm 85) speaks of God as 'good and forgiving'. God is a 'God of mercy and compassion, slow to anger, abounding in love and truth'. In our sinfulness we pray that God will 'turn and take pity on us'. We pray in this way because we know that our lives matter. What we do matters, to ourselves and to others. We cannot go on sinning and pretend that ultimately it doesn't matter. It does, eternally. So we pray for the strength to change so that we can live a free, creative and love-giving life now and for all eternity.

How do we reach out for help? How do we know what is best for us? We don't. We often don't know how to pray. We don't know what words to use. In the Second Reading (Romans 8:26-27) Paul tells us to trust that God knows, and that God will interpret our longing correctly. After all

God put it there. So we follow Paul's advice here. If we have any petitions, make them, but always in trust and always with the rider that we want what God wants. If we can think, then let us do so. But when God draws us beyond thoughts, and when we cannot make sense of anything, and when feelings no longer help - then, let us not give up praying. That is the time to yield to the silence of love and to allow our breathing - the breathing of God's own Spirit in us - to take over. That is the time to be like a child, to cast ourselves upon God and let his Spirit enfold us and pray in us and through us. God knows our heart better than we do and knows our inmost hopes and longings.

The Gospel (Matthew 13:24-30) is a warning against being too cock-sure about our judgments. While we are reflective, and striving to be honest, we must remember that we are not very wise. It is best to leave absolute judgment to God, and to remember that God's judgment is right because God's judgment is that of one who loves. We should never criticise others unless we love them, and self-criticism is most unwise unless we have a healthy respect for the self that God creates and loves. We may pull out some weeds from our own or other people's lives, but what a tragedy it would be if the price of pulling out the weeds was to destroy our own or other people's mysterious capacity to love!

The soil of our hearts is good, and the Sower is continually sowing good seed in the garden that is our life. Believe it, listen to God, and let the Spirit carry our spirit to God and so to others. The weeds will not be able to survive the fire of God's purification of our hearts. Let God do the clearing; let God do the purifying. Our focus is to be on willing God's will and on doing the truth in love, no matter what. Then hell will hold no fear for us. If, however, we are tempted to be slack or to throw away the real values that sustain our lives in love, we have the teaching of hell to be a warning for us. Jesus loved us enough to give us this warning. Church people who think they know better may sound compassionate, but they are seriously misguided. Only the truth will set us free, however hard it might sound