

16th Sunday Ordinary Time, Year A

Today's Gospel invites us to reflect on Jesus' and the Church's teaching on hell.

In all teaching we have to distinguish between the essential truth being conveyed and the imagery used to convey it. As regards hell there are two key images. The first is of a king who is determined to see that bad behaviour is punished, and has the power to punish. We see this in Jesus' parable about the Last Judgment. The king says to those who failed to love: 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire' (Matthew 25:41). The second is the image of fire as the punishment. Flood and fire were seen as the two main destructive forces. We are all familiar with the story of Noah and the Flood, and God's promise that the earth would never again be destroyed by flood. This left 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 today's parable 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).

It is clear that Jesus wants us to take very seriously the consequences, the eternal consequences of our sin. It is also clear that the essential pain of hell is expressed in the words 'Depart from me!' Paul sums up the teaching of the New 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. (2 Thessalonians 1:8-9).

To imagine God as determined to punish sin and as creating hell as the punishment contradicts everything Jesus revealed about God. In the parable of the Prodigal Son it was not the father who created the pig yard. It was the consequence of the boy's life of debauchery (see Luke 15). Everything we do has consequences.

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 wilful 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' (2 Peter 3:9)' (n.1037).

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 into 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 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 God, the object of our longing and loving.

Today's First Reading (Wisdom 12:13,16-19) stresses God's parental concern. We are reminded that God 'cares for everything' is 'lenient to all' and 'mild in judgment'. God has given us hope because after sin God 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. 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. 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 reminds us that we are not very wise. It is best to leave absolute judgment to God who knows the truth and so 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. Let us 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. Only the truth will set us free, however hard it might sound.