

'We face a burning future. Things are going to get too hot for us, and it will be our fault. Because of the way we have behaved we are all going to suffer. But it may not be too late to change the way we live and save our selves.' Those are words put into the mouth of an extreme warmist, one who campaigns about global warming. Quite a few people today are gripped by fear about the future of the planet. Secular dread of a fiery doom has some parallels in the fear of hell that was once so strong in the Christian conscience. At least until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century you could not avoid hearing hell-fire sermons. With grim relish theologians and preachers gathered up the scattered references to hell in the Bible and let their imaginations paint lurid pictures of the pains to be suffered for ever by those judged by God.

In the Church Fathers, in the sixty surviving medieval hell-fire sermons, in 19<sup>th</sup> century theologians such as Newman and Pusey, hell is an article of faith, filled with pitch-forks, sharp implements, smells, noise and fire. It goes on for ever and it is sealed shut. But this element in Christian belief, coarse and cruel as it is, has retreated to the recesses of our world view. Perhaps it has been replaced by very present images of hellishness. Since the moving image became ubiquitous we are much more affected by the horrors of warfare, the calculated cruelty of the gas chambers and the unbearable heat of atomic explosions.

Believing in Hell presumes on an underlying belief that this life we live is only part of the story. There is a wider context. A human life, according to the picture in the Venerable Bede, is like the flight of a bird through a great hall. It enters from the darkness and flies out into the darkness. Believing in heaven and hell implies that things happen beyond that dark window. There is unfinished business. The Christian movement speculated and elaborated, mapped and timetabled this after-life, free from any risk of corroboration or denial, for obvious reasons.

The idea of Purgatory was developed as a way of dealing with the unfinished business in peoples' lives, enabling them to go on growing in holiness and preparing for heaven. Hell was the final destiny, either immediately or at a Last Judgement, for those who were incurably and unrepentantly against God. It is noticeable how often it is other people who are going to hell, particularly the people the writer doesn't like. One of the great unobserved Biblical commands must be 'Vengeance is mine, says the Lord.'

I suggested that hell is not a live issue for post-enlightenment Christians. To an extent we are embarrassed by the coarseness of the theology. But it is very much a live issue for us to go on exploring God and who he is. And it is an equally pressing question as to how we should live our lives. Do we live them in the belief that this is all there is or are we living in the light of eternity?

So the idea that God might be a God who punishes the recalcitrant and tortures them for ever is a mighty challenge. And the further idea that he is the kind of God who allows us to be frightened into being good is the first I want to deal with.

There is an example, albeit fictional, of Hell used as a frightener in Father Arnall's sermon in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Dr John Casey of Gonville and Caius, in his recent book on heaven and hell, sees in the detailed descriptions of the pains of hell an attempt to bring home to the hearers the reality of sin and its malice. Dr Casey sounds almost wistful that hell is no longer taken seriously. The Christian conscience needs bracing with a touch of fear of consequences. Hell is a useful deterrent, like the fear of the gallows or nuclear devastation. Sadly that fear was used by a paternalist Church to satisfy their belief that the people needed to be cowed into conformity or there would be chaos. It was also a very profitable scheme, for instance in the income from indulgences.

But is fear a good motive for conversion and holiness? We may admit to some concern about the destiny of ourselves and our loved ones. Is our life worth saving? The New Testament challenges us very deeply to hear the parable of the sheep and goats, which is a spur to love our neighbour now in this life. But overwhelmingly St Paul asserts that the right motive for loving God is gratitude. The first turning towards God is a response to the prior, or prevenient, Grace of God. The fear of God, which is the beginning of wisdom, is the apprehension of the moral force which is God. Sir Thomas Browne was quite certain that the motive for being good should not be fear. 'That terrible terme (Hell) hath never detained me from sin, nor do I owe any good action to the name thereof: I feare God, yet am not afraid of him, his mercies make me ashamed of my sins, before his judgements afraid thereof.'

And so to the main question concerning the nature of God. Do we believe in the kind of God who would choose some for joy in his presence and send others away to everlasting punishment? This was the doctrine which certain men of courage questioned in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Churchmen such as F.W.Farrar and F.D.Maurice of this College and Bishop Colenso of St John's were persecuted for suggesting that the doctrine was unworthy of the gospel of the God revealed in Jesus Christ who wills to love and save all mankind. The Reverend H.B.Wilson was actually brought before the Court of Arches in 1862 and condemned for his critique of eternal punishment This was on the authority of the Athanasian Creed which states that 'they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.' But he won his appeal to the Privy Council, with the Lord Chancellor pronouncing:

'We are not at liberty to express any opinion upon the mysterious question of final punishment, further than to say that we do not find in the Formularies...any such distinct declaration of our Church upon the subject as to require us to condemn as penal the expression of hope by a clergyman, that even the ultimate pardon of the wicked, who are condemned in the day of judgment may be consistent with the will of Almighty God.'

On the basis of that wonderfully judicious verdict I feel more confident to explore the conviction that it is the will and purpose of God to save and restore his whole creation. In the end, when all unbelief has been overcome, all can be saved and all will be saved. 'For as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.' This notion was condemned as heresy very early by the Church and we have never quite been able to bring ourselves to give up the dualism of heaven and hell. A place must be reserved for the utterly reprobate and unloving.

Behind this orthodox view lies a simple feeling – it is just not right or fair that some should avoid punishment. The idea of hell was primarily motivated by a feeling for justice. We want to believe that this is a moral universe, in which goodness is rewarded and wickedness receives proportionate punishment. Many evil-doers will be punished in this life. They will suffer the consequences of their actions. But if they get away with it now at least we can know that the scales of justice will be righted in the end.

Hell is a projection of our hopes and fears. A person may fear that because of what they have done or not done in life they will be in torment after death. Others may hope that truly bad people or those who have done us personal wrong will one day be duly punished.

Even as I say that I am struck by the inhumanity of such thoughts. I recognise in myself a judgmental spirit. I am probably more judgmental than God. Other people I know certainly are. We can be viciously censorious. But does God judge us, and utterly reject any of his creatures in the way that we write off each other?

The trouble is that the Gospel in the end overturns all our categories of strict justice and retribution. The Christ I believe in is reported as teaching us to love our enemies, to bless those that persecute us. He begins as our accuser in the court of God but then leaps over the dock and stands beside the accused appealing for their life. He is said to have prayed for his killers, 'Father forgive them, for they know not what they do'. . And this Christ is traditionally the authority at the Last Judgement.

Are we to expect less of God than he expects from human beings? He is the God of righteousness and truth. He *is* justice. The heart of God is wounded and affronted by human wickedness. In that sense he is angry with sin, hurt and betrayed. But his response is to give himself into the heart of sin, to feel to the depths its awful dimensions and overcome it by the enduring power of his love.

At no point is human free-will compromised. He does not compel mankind to love him. But he will go to any lengths to gain a loving response from every soul.

It may be possible for some finally to resist the advances of God the Lover. They will be in a cold, silent place. As Dostoyevsky said, 'Hell is the pain of no longer being able to love.'

The only mention of hell in our liturgy is in the Creed – 'He descended into Hell.'

To me that means that there is no area or dimension of life, no corner of the universe, that God has left untouched in his search for us.

Karl Barth was one who wanted to believe in a God who never gives up on us. He wanted, 'to hope and pray cautiously and yet distinctly that in spite of everything which might seem conclusively to proclaim the opposite, His compassion should not fail, and that in accordance with his mercy which is "new every morning" He "will not cast off for ever" (La.3: 22,31) This conviction, that our lives are both judged by God and infinitely valued by him, is expressed in a dialogue by W.R.Maltby, which the Chaplain will help me to read:

Where are you going, Shepherd?

To find my sheep.

How far will you go?

As far as my sheep.

How fare may that be?

To the world's end.

How long will you seek it?

Until I find it.

When you find it, will it come to you?

No, it will fly from me.

Where will it go then?

To the rocks and the sand.

When will it stop?

When it can run no more.

What will you do then?

Carry it home.

None of us can know what happens to us when we die. We know that our physical being is dissolved along with all the faculties that belong to the biosphere. But what might happen in the dimension we call God, sometimes called the noosphere? This, of course, is a matter for faith and belief. The great William Whewell, Master of this College, delivered a deeply-felt sermon in this Chapel on the death of his wife, expressing his belief that God's relationship with her could not be broken. 'Can we suppose that the soul when it has reached such a point is to sink into nothingness? When it has so far matured is it to be crushed

for ever? Can he who unfolds the germ into the bud, and the bud into the flower and the flower into the fruit unfold the soul so far and then consign it to destruction?’

If the future is not nothingness then it is God. Everything depends on God. If there is any being for us after death, then it will be in God. As John Robinson put it in an article in *The Sun*, The definition of heaven and hell is the same: being with God – for ever. For some that’s heaven, for some it’s hell: for most of us it’s a bit of both.’