

Advent IV 2008

When we divided up the four last things I picked the short straw. I have to preach on hell, four days before Christmas. But that is not altogether inappropriate perhaps, because Christmas can be hell for some people. Those who live on their own without family or friends and have become bitter and twisted in their loneliness, and - having no time for the Church - refuse every invitation to a free lunch and a bit of company. Those who are out on the street, begging for enough money to buy a bottle of cider to keep out the cold and help them forget. Those who can't afford to get the kids what they want for Christmas and are facing unemployment and re-possession. And these are just the ones on our own doorstep; there are so many others for whom hell is here and now in this world. But what do we make of hell as one of the last things? Hell in the next world?

There are two different concepts of hell in the Bible. The first is Sheol, the shadowy resting place for all the departed until the righteous are raised in glory at the end. That is the sense of the the words in the Creed, that our Lord "descended into Hell." That means simply that he joined us in our common fate as mortals. The second is Gehenna, the fiery place of punishment for the wicked, where there is no rest and no hope of glory. That word does not occur in the Creed and there is therefore less obligation to accept it into your own vocabulary.

In the 1990s I was on the Church of England Doctrine Commission as we prepared a report entitled *The Mystery of Salvation*. There are some quite good things in it, I think. After publication, it was reviewed in the Press. *The Independent* for the 11th of January 1996 ran the headline "The Church's empty hell." There was only one paragraph about hell in a report, running to 225 pages – after all, the book was about the mystery of salvation not about the misery of damnation. Everything else in it was ignored by the press. And we did not say that hell was empty; what we actually said was this, and I quote:

"It is our conviction that the reality of hell (and indeed of heaven) is the ultimate affirmation of human freedom. Hell is not eternal torment but it is the final and irrevocable choosing of that which is opposed to God so completely and so absolutely that the only end is total non-being. Whether there be any who do so choose, only God knows."

The newspaper reporter insinuated that this was typically Anglican wishy-washy liberalism, but actually the theological debate about the eternity of hell goes right back to the early church; Origen in the third century was eventually condemned two hundred years later for denying the doctrine, and no one can accuse Origen of being a liberal.

I could at this point just repeat the statement of the Doctrine Commission and give you a very short sermon. But the Vicar would probably accuse me in the pub afterwards of copping out. So I will make three further points about hell. They are: 1. hell signifies the ultimate defeat of evil; 2. hell is required by our sense of moral outrage; and 3. the language of hell in the New Testament is intentionally and consciously rhetorical.

First, the picture of hell we have from medieval wall paintings is of little red devils shovelling the damned, members of the aristocracy or the hierarchy, naked except for their crowns and mitres, into the furnace and obviously enjoying their work. But this is a distortion: the first candidates for hell-fire according to the New Testament are

not corrupt and self indulgent human beings; they are rather the devil and his angels. In Matthew's vision of the last judgment which we call the parable of the Sheep and the Goats, the Son of Man says to those on his left "Depart from me you cursed into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. There may be other poor souls who end up in the fire, but, notice, the devil is first in line. Similarly, in Revelation chapter 20, the devil is cast into a bottomless pit, and allowed out for one last fling, is thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur. The first in line for punishment in hell is the devil himself. If you subtract the bizarre apocalyptic imagery from all this, what you have left is the affirmation of the ultimate defeat of evil, which is a direct corollary of our belief in the ultimate sovereignty of Good. In that sense, hell is good news.

Second point: talk of hell is required by our sense of moral outrage. There are some acts perpetrated by individuals or by rogue states that are so utterly wicked that only the language of hell is adequate to describe what we feel when we learn about them. To take the obvious example, when we saw the newsreels of the liberation of Belsen and Auswitz, there were simply no words to express our moral outrage except the language of hell. No punishment handed down by the judges at Nuremberg on Hitler, Goebbels or Himmler could possibly have satisfied the requirements of justice. They killed themselves, thank goodness. And we were left to deal with buffoons like Goering and madmen like Hess.

For some acts of sheer evil, there is nothing we can do but implore our just and merciful Creator to avenge the innocent victims of such inhumanity. We need a vision of hell in such cases to avoid becoming inhuman ourselves. Not to feel personally affronted by these evils is to abdicate our own humanity.

My third point is about the rhetoric of hell. Now, rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and the point here is to persuade people to change their behaviour and avoid facing the otherwise awful consequences.

While hell as Gehenna is not in the Creed, it does figure in the teaching of Jesus and so we have to take it seriously. But we need to be cautious: some of the words of Jesus on this subject have been enhanced by over-enthusiastic evangelists. Matthew for example has the phrase "thrown into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth" a full six times. One suspects he is particularly fond of his own formulation.

There is only one reference to Gehenna in Mark's Gospel, which deserves a closer look from the point of view of rhetoric. In chapter 9 Jesus says:

"If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; for it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell. And if your foot causes you to stumble cut it off; for it is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where the worm does not die and the fire is not quenched."

These words are almost certainly those of the historical Jesus. And that they are meant rhetorically, not literally, is clear from the presence of hyperbole and irony. Hyperbole – it goes without saying that Jesus was not advocating physical self mutilation, but in a deliberately exaggerated metaphor, spiritual repentance.

And irony – Jesus spent his time healing the maimed, the lame and the blind. He was not drumming up new customers, but telling the self-satisfied able-bodied Pharisees that they were more at risk than those they despised as disabled and rejected by God. Notice finally the sentence that follows this saying: "Everyone will be salted with fire." This is not a fire reserved for the wicked but a purifying fire that everyone needs. If one is looking for a text to support the doctrine of purgatory – rejected by

the reformers, but when understood correctly a chance for us all to eventually be able to gaze upon the face of God without unashamed. The purpose of the fire in this rhetoric is not punishment but purification; the fire of sincere remorse; it acts like a disinfectant, like worms on a suppurating wound.

I would much rather have preached on the gospel for Advent IV, the annunciation. So I'll give you a bit of another sermon, based on one of my favourite paintings.



Fra Angelico painted this scene several times, but this surely is his masterpiece. Unlike many other paintings of the Annunciation, this one is not confined indoors. You can just see Mary's little monastic cell in the background, but she is out on the veranda and the angel comes in from the garden. He comes therefore not as a flood of light into a shady room, but more as a breath of fresh air into an already sunlit scene. And like the breath of God, there is a gentle movement through the painting. The composition leads the eye from the garden up the angel's wing and along the line of his gaze towards the figure of Mary. This sense of movement on the left hand side is resolved into an attentive stillness on the right, where Mary is sitting detached and centred. The whole painting – if I could put it this way – is a most virginal conception. There is no invasion of privacy. The figures are carefully separated by their respective arches, and the angel approaches not with a blaze of power but with divine humility. His hands like hers remain crossed over his breast, and his knee is beginning to bend in supplication.

Close to, one cannot miss those incredible wings, which are not boring ostrich feathers, but run from blue to gold, through brown and red and green and yellow. They are example of what the poet called "pied beauty" – "Glory be to God for dappled things!" And the same poet speaks elsewhere of "a dearest freshness deep down things." "The Holy Spirit over the bent world broods with warm breast and with – ah! – bright wings."

I don't pretend to be an art expert but this painting speaks to me of some of the things that most need to be said about the Annunciation and about the miracle we celebrate at Christmas. Three points above all, which can be briefly stated. First, God comes to us; he does not wait for us to come to him. He sends his Holy Spirit, his angel. His Word (along with all the other curious expressions we use to describe this reality) to tell us about himself, his love and forgiveness, his purpose for us.

Next, God's coming into his world in no way contradicts the other truth, that he is continually present with us in the world as our Creator. He comes to show us (could we but see it) that he was in fact already here. His coming uncovers the world's deep-down freshness and all its variegated beauty.

And finally, just as God created the natural world out of love and gentleness and leaves us free to respond, so also at his Advent, there is no invasion, no coercion, only humility and appeal. The Incarnation is a quiet miracle accomplished through the free response of Mary to the divine Word.

In formulating Christian doctrine, it is perfectly proper to give priority to what is distinctive about Christian faith. The doctrine of hell, inherited from Jewish

apocalyptic and shared by most of the other world's faiths, is not the place to start. The Annunciation scene, like the scene at the Cross, is our unique story, and it tells us that God respects our freedom – which is in the end what led the Doctrine Commission to its conclusion - and this is the corollary of the good news that we are free by God's grace to respond as Mary did to his loving appeal.