

Eternal Damnation

When I was writing about the Lord's Prayer for the September magazine, I mentioned the possibility of eternal damnation as one of the evils from which we pray to be delivered. Would it have been better to say that eternal damnation is the evil from which we need to be delivered? Anyway, it occurred to me that eternal damnation is not something we talk about much and, probably, a lot of people don't believe in it anyway. People seem to me to have fairly vague ideas about life after death, either believing that there is no life after death or that any life after death is bound to be quite pleasant, a continuation of our lives in this world, only without pain or taxes. Heavenly rapture and the torments of hell both seem a bit extreme to mild-mannered Englishmen and women.

Obviously you can believe what you like and you may well believe that the God you believe in wouldn't allow anyone to go to hell or to be damned eternally. That's what I would like to believe too, but, I have to ask, on what do you base your belief? Have you invented a god who suits you? Are you the author of your own religion? Or have you picked up your beliefs from family and friends? Did your Church teach you what to believe? Or did you work it out from the Bible or from other sources, or by using your own commonsense? I shouldn't like to think that your beliefs on this important subject were groundless! Or even that they were constructed on shaky foundations.

Some people rely on a caricature in which the God of the Old Testament is vengeful, wrathful and judgmental and Jesus in the New Testament is meek, mild and merciful. This caricature may extend to a belief that the Church (until some time about the middle of the twentieth century) used to terrify people into believing with threats of hell, and then that, quite suddenly, we abandoned all that to become inclusive, all embracing and value free, accepting that nothing really matters and that all or most people will make it to Heaven irrespective of what they do, how they live or what they believe.

These are, however, caricatures. For a start, the Old Testament says very little about life after death. The focus of the Old Testament is very much on this world. The basic message of the Old Testament is that God is in charge of this world and that things go right in this life when people co-operate with God and that they go wrong when people go against God. It is obviously much more subtle than that and you need to read the Old Testament for yourself, but this is the basic message. There is very little in the Old Testament about what happens to you after you die.

It is Jesus, in the New Testament, Who warns of terrible judgment to come, with the possibility of being "cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched, where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."

So where do these ideas of Heaven and Hell come from? What is the point of them? Most human cultures and religions seem to have some idea of an afterlife – even those which believe that what happens is that you return to this earth as someone or something else (reincarnation). I think it is generally true that most religions hold that what happens to you after you die depends on what you have done. The afterlife is a reward or a punishment for what you have done with this life.

The point of the afterlife from this perspective is justice. As the Old Testament teaches, things tend to go well in this world if people are good, and things go badly when people are evil. But, as the Old Testament well knows, it is often good people who suffer, at least for a time, and evil people who seem, again at least for a time, to get away with it. That seems wrong. It is an outrage. One of the first things we learn when we are young is a sense of justice or fair play. Children very soon complain when things aren't fair. So Abraham demanded, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" Our whole sense of morality, our whole sense of our humanity, depends finally on our faith that Justice ultimately prevails.

Judgment after death, punishment for the wicked and vindication for the innocent enable us still to believe that the Universe is ultimately just, even though, in this life, it often looks as if there is no justice. A good person gets a horrible disease. A bad person lives a long and prosperous life. I believe nevertheless that there is justice in time but that often it is pretty rough justice. I also believe, however, that it is all sorted out in eternity.

The Second World War is an example of what I mean. Nazism was evil and the Nazis were defeated eventually. Justice prevailed. However, what about the people who died fighting for the right, the innocent civilians who were bombed, the millions who died in the concentration camps? They didn't live to enjoy the fruits of victory. And what about the Nazi supporters who survived the war, avoided being tried for war crimes and perhaps managed to hang on to their ill gotten gains for many years after the War? Where is the justice in that? There was justice in this world of time and space, the material world, but it was pretty rough justice. I do believe, however, that there is perfect Justice in the spiritual realm, in eternity. I believe that the people who died fighting for right and the innocents who were killed receive justice the other side of the grave, just as I believe that those who got away with it in this life nevertheless face the consequences of their actions in the life to come.

We are often torn, we suppose, between justice and mercy. We can't really envisage a good God dealing out serious punishment, but neither can we think that murders and rapists, concentration camp guards and paedophiles should simply get away with it. It isn't merciful to the victims of evil people to let their tormentors off.

Heaven and Hell are perfectly reasonable concepts because we believe in Justice. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

If, however, we accept the concept of punishment beyond the grave for really bad people, don't we have to accept that all our conduct comes under judgment? We might want to say that murderers and rapists should go to Hell, but that people who commit much more minor misdemeanours (the sort of wrong things you and I do) ought to be let off with a slap on the wrist or not punished at all. But where do we draw the line? If murder merits hell, what about serious assault? If serious assault deserves eternal damnation, what about a more minor assault? Terrifyingly, Jesus says, "But whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire." Getting angry and insulting someone could land you in Hell - if Jesus is to be believed!

By now, if you're still with me, you might be willing to accept that there is ultimate Justice in eternity, that the good are rewarded and the evil are punished after death, but I guess that there are still lots of questions. Very few people are consistently good. Christians believe that Jesus Himself was the only truly good man. No-one (except Jesus) would deserve Heaven if you have to be perfect. But, surely, very few people are entirely evil. Eternal damnation seems very harsh even for a concentration camp commandant, but for someone who abused the ticket collector on a railway station? Why aren't there grades of punishment, depending on the seriousness of the offence – hellfire for Hitler, but a few days in Purgatory for the commuter who loses his temper?

This is where it gets difficult. We have to remember that God and the realm of the spirit are not only beyond our understanding; they are beyond our imagination. We have to use pictures, metaphors and analogies if we are to speak about these things at all. I think the Truth we are trying to grasp is that ultimately there are only two choices – fellowship with God, which is life, and alienation from God, which is death. All that stuff about unquenchable fires and insatiable worms is a metaphor for eternal death, a concept which we cannot possibly understand. Similarly, images of pearly gates, harps and heavenly singing are attempts to describe eternal life, although eternal life is necessarily indescribable to those of us who are still living the half life we experience in the material, temporal world.

All sin alienates from God. We alienate ourselves from God if we become murderers, bank robbers or rapists. We also alienate ourselves from God if we abuse our fellow human beings, steal a few pence or commit adultery. It is not the magnitude of the offence which separates us from God; it is the fact of any offence at all. There can be no fellowship between sin and the thrice holy God. Sinners cannot be in the presence of God.

This leads to the Christian understanding that nobody is good enough for God. Nobody deserves to go to Heaven and there is only one alternative destination. You are either in the presence of God or you are not. To be with God is Heaven. To be without God is hell.

There is no space here to go into this in detail, but the next chapter in the Christian story is Jesus. God comes into the world in the person of Jesus. Jesus makes God fully known, because Jesus is fully God. He is also fully human and lives a human life as human life is meant to be lived. In Jesus God deals with sin. It has to be God's initiative. There is nothing we sinners can do to save ourselves, but God saves us in Jesus. What is required of us is repentance and faith. If we put our faith in Jesus and confess our sins, God makes us like Jesus. Our sins are washed away. God makes us the brothers and sisters of Jesus. We are adopted into His family. We are coheirs with Christ. We are citizens of Heaven. We have eternal life.

The price of our forgiveness is the Death of Jesus on the Cross. Our salvation, therefore is not cheap or easy. It is not without value. It is priceless. When we think of what Jesus did for us, of how much He loves us, the only reasonable response on our part is to love Him with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength, and, if we only love like that, we'll sin no more. Faith in the Christ Who died on the Cross for us cannot be casual, careless or indifferent. It is all consuming.

The Cross unites Justice and Mercy, God and humanity. Through the Cross of Jesus, we have eternal life.

There remain three questions.

1) What about people who have never heard about Jesus and what about people who have rejected Jesus because they have been put off Him by Christians? I think that the answer to that is that people are judged according to their consciences. Essentially, we all know the difference between right and wrong. What have we done with that knowledge?

2) Is there any chance of changing after death? The usual (and safe) answer is that there is not. You have the choice whether to walk with God or to reject Him throughout your life, but, when your life is over, you will just have to accept the consequences of the decision you finally took. There is just a hint that souls might hear the Gospel from Jesus in the hereafter and have an opportunity of life, but it would be foolish to depend on it. Maybe this is for people who never heard of or never understood Jesus in this life. Anyway, why would you want to put off loving Jesus till after death? We have a better life on earth for knowing Him than we would if we didn't know Him, as well as an infinitely good one to look forward to in Heaven.

3) Why does a loving God ("Who desireth not the death of a sinner") allow anyone to go to Hell? I think the answer is that God finally accepts our right to make our own decision. He is like a Good Shepherd, searching for every lost sheep. He reaches out to us. He woos us. Christ dies for us. There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents. But ultimately it is our decision whether we go with God or reject Him. I'm sure it breaks God's heart if people finally reject Him. Maybe, in the end, everybody does come to know the Truth and Hell is empty. I'd like to think so, but it would be complacent to believe that it must be so and irresponsible of me to preach that it is necessarily so.

Heaven and Hell are necessary because there necessarily is Justice if life is to make any sense at all. Mercy and justice are two sides of the same coin, which is love. So God justly and mercifully opens the Kingdom of Heaven to all believers. This is all more awesome than we can possibly comprehend, but eternal life is what God intends for all of us. We only have to respond to His love.

From all evil and mischief; from sin, from the crafts and assaults of the devil; from thy wrath, and from everlasting damnation,
Good Lord, deliver us.