

HOMILY FOR ADVENT II – HELL - 2022

Contemplation of the last things - Heaven, Hell, Death and Judgement – is about as unfashionable and out of step as we could imagine. But it is necessary we consider them seriously if we are going to take Advent, and the twofold coming of Christ seriously. - Quoted from The Homily for Advent I given by Fr Rene last week.

For many people today, the concept of hell is something that is outdated, a relic of the past that has served its purpose and can be safely done away with. To some extent a thought like that belongs to people who would also say that the concept of resurrection is just as outdated and that it too should be done away with.

For those who are interested in what Jesus actually taught, as distinct from what many individuals might think that he taught, hell simply cannot be dismissed. All of us in this church today are people of the largely secular and materialistic western world. Even though we are sincere believers, and the great majority of us would characterise ourselves as conservative believers to boot, the doctrine of hell, the very mention of hell, is uncomfortable and challenging for most of us. However, our understanding of hell shapes our view of the gospel, God's holiness, and our depravity. If we don't accept the reality of hell, we won't rightly understand the glory of the gospel. Its also worth noting that if there is no heaven or hell as the secular world likes to imagine, then there is no justice, there is no recompense, there is no punishment and there is no reward.

With that as a backdrop, we should begin by noting that Jesus talked about hell often. In fact, Jesus talked about hell more than any other person in the Bible. Jesus talks about hell more than He talks about heaven, and He describes it more vividly. In Luke 16 he describes a great chasm over which "*none may cross from there to us.*" In Matthew 25 Jesus tells of a time when people will be separated into two groups, one entering into His presence, the other banished to "*eternal fire.*"

In the gospels, Jesus speaks about Hell in great detail. He describes it is a place of eternal torment in Luke 16:23, of unquenchable fire in Mark 9:43, it is a place where the worm does not die, see Mark 9:48, where people will gnash their teeth in anguish and regret in Matthew 13:42. And it is a place from which there is no return, even to warn loved ones in Luke 16:19-31. In Matthew 25:30, Jesus calls hell a place of “*outer darkness*” He compares it to “*Gehenna*” in Matthew 10:28 which was a foul and revolting rubbish dump outside the walls of Jerusalem where rubbish was burned and where maggots abounded.

Time and again, Jesus uses this powerful, strong, and vivid language about hell because it is real and unspeakably horrible. There’s no denying that Jesus knew, believed, and warned about the absolute reality of hell. He spoke about hell so vividly and so frequently because it is the fate that awaits all people apart from Him. Contrary to popular belief, hell is not a place where God sends those who have been especially or exceptionally evil, wicked or bad; rather, it is our default destination. If we don’t accept the reality of hell – a state of eternal punishment - we won’t rightly understand the glory of the gospel. This is because right at the heart of the Christian worldview is our understanding of the fallen nature of humankind. We that we are all sinners. We know that we are all guilty. We know that we all deserve God’s eternal punishment. We all stand in need one who can rescue us or we shall all stand condemned.

It is the great wonder of the incarnation that Jesus came to call us to repentance, to turn away from sinfulness and its consequences. However He not only warned of the dangers of hell; He offered the way out. He lived a life of perfect obedience. He died a sacrificial death on the cross for our sins, and He rose from the dead to defeat sin, death, and the devil. In His risen glory, Jesus invites everyone to trust in Him in order to receive eternal life rather than the eternal punishment that everyone deserves for their sin.

So we're left with two options: reject the Father and Jesus Christ and stay in our state of depravity and be eternally punished. Or submit to the Saviour and accept His gift of redemption. Jesus, with His nail-scarred hands and wounded side, is worthy of our complete trust. His goodness enables us to look ultimately not to hell, but to the cross, to the resurrection and to everlasting life.

God is both great and good, just and merciful. His greatness causes us to bow the knee, to cry out in awe and wonder, and to fear Him. His justice makes us realise we don't deserve salvation; we deserve punishment. His goodness, on the other hand, causes us to rise up in endless praise, grateful for our Saviour whose mercy allows us to enter into His presence boldly and without fear. Because He is good, we can have a relationship with Him as a child who is dearly loved, and rescued from the flames of hell.

The character of God is the guarantee that all wrongs will be righted someday. When the 'day of God's wrath arrives, that is to say, the last day when his righteous judgement will be revealed, His retribution will be exact, and no problems of cosmic unfairness will remain to haunt us. God is the Judge, so justice will be done. On that day, all that is wrong will be made right. God's ways will be seen by all to be good, including the demonstration of his eternal justice. For now, we must walk in humility and faith, trusting in the cross of Jesus Christ. Though we may well fear God's judgement and the torments of hell, all the while we hope that in His mercy and by the power of His grace at work within us and by our good works that we will be numbered among the elect.

St Paul puts that thought into wise words when he says: *"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgements and how inscrutable are His his ways!"* (Romans 11:33).