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Is Hell Real? (Matthew 13.44-50)

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I wonder if you can guess from our reading what tonight's 'You Can't Ask That' questions are concerned with??! Let's hear from Jenny and Jill!

Jill

How can Jesus Christ judge human beings and yet also forgive them? I still don't quite understand that.

Jenny

Is hell real?

Thanks to passages like the one we just heard, threats of God's judgement and fear of eternal damnation, have controlled and frightened many Christians for centuries. Their terrifying violence is one of the reasons people give for rejecting Christianity and its view of the world, though most of us who remain within the church also find it difficult to take literally any notion of the 'weeping and gnashing of teeth'. As Diarmaid McCulloch points out in his monumental history of Christianity, in our day 'certain aspects of the Christian past are being jettisoned without fuss' and 'The most notable casualty of the past century has been Hell' which has dropped out of Christian preaching almost entirely. The fires of Hell, he writes, 'hardly flicker at all [even] in world-wide televangelism',¹ and you may have noticed that it's not a recurring theme at Benedictus either! And yet, as another question I received this week from Tim expressed it:

the scriptures seem full of binary choices and binary ends. Choose life or death, be with the sheep or the goats, qualify for eternal life or eternal separation. In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, **Jesus** even seems to give credence to the once-traditional idea of eternal conscious torment, hell as the terrifying destination of those rejected at Judgment. And certainly, the notions of judgment and eternal consequences seem a powerful theme in Jesus' teaching and the New Testament generally.

¹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), p.1012.

In Christian theology, these questions belong to what's called 'eschatology' – the understanding of 'last things'. They raise major theological questions – what kind of God do we proclaim? And major anthropological questions – how is our death related to our life? So I'm going to start with the question of how we conceive the relationship between our death and our life, between our post-mortem state and the way we live now.

Some believe there isn't much relationship at all. Death is simply the end. We might think of this in terms of mere extinction, as in Kerry Packer's famous remark: 'I've been to the other side, and there's nothing there'. In the ancient world, the experience of being dead was conceived a little more substantively than this, but not much. In the Scriptures, the Hebrew word 'Sheol', which is equivalent to the Greek notion of 'Hades', names the place of the dead. This is an underworld characterised by shadows and silence, and it's where everyone ends up – righteous and unrighteous alike. Sheol not a place of punishment, so much as non-life. 'The dead do not praise the Lord, nor all those who go down to silence', says Psalm 115. Yet, in the Scriptural imagination, this does not entail that the dead are entirely God-forsaken. 'If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol you are there', proclaims Psalm 139, and this sense of God present even to the dead, of God overcoming death itself, is a key part of the gospel proclamation.

When, after his own death, Jesus is said to descend to the dead and raise them with him to new life (1 Peter 3.19; 4.6), it is to Sheol that he goes. In the Eastern church, this vision of death now touched and encompassed by a larger life is powerfully expressed in icons of Jesus breaking down the doors, trampling on the gates of death, and grasping Adam and Eve by their wrists, pulling them from the grave with the whole of humanity following them. This is known as the 'harrowing of hell', but note that here the word 'hell' doesn't have its 'hellish' connotations but means simply the place of the dead, the grave. The 'good news' of Jesus involves the proclamation that even death cannot separate us from the love of God, and (as St Paul puts it) 'whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's' (Romans 14.8).

There is, however, a second Scriptural vision of the experience of death, which involves a stronger sense of post-mortem accountability for the lives we've led. This notion was a late-ish development in Jewish thought. Its origins have been connected to a period of Israel's 'political subjugation ... [when] the faithful people did not experience the fulfilment of God's promises to them, and many came to believe that the righteous would be rewarded in some later realm'.² The apocryphal literature written during the centuries before Christ 'contains descriptions of the places of eternal reward and punishment awaiting the good and the evil'. In other words, on this vision no longer does everyone end up in Sheol – but the righteous and unrighteous are separated after death. In this literature, the word 'gehenna' is used to designate the place of post-mortem punishment.

According to scholars, the name is derived from the Hebrew 'ge hinnom', the Valley of Hinnom, where King Ahaz offered his child as a burnt-sacrifice to Molech³ (2 Chronicles 28.3) and where the people of Judah were likewise accused by the prophet Jeremiah of sacrificing children to foreign gods, 'burning their sons and daughters in the fire' (Jeremiah 7:31; 19:2–6). This location is said later to have become the site of a perpetually burning garbage dump, and so to represent the fate of those punished by God.⁴ And, as we know, this apocalyptic imagery of a fiery hell to which the unrighteous are everlastingly condemned is picked up in the New Testament, attributed at times to Jesus himself, and has powerfully formed the Western church.

Notice then that a couple of things go into what we might call the 'invention' of 'hell' as we know it. First, the concept of hell is a corollary of the view that our lives are subject to judgement, that there will be a reckoning at the end. And second, there's the notion that for evil-doers, this reckoning will issue in punishment. So before we turn to the question of how seriously we need to take this possibility, I want to say some more about what it means to believe that our lives are subject to

² Gail Ramshaw, *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary* (Minneapolis, MI: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2002), p.215.

³ Ramshaw, *Treasures Old and New*, p.215.

⁴ Ramshaw, *Treasures Old and New*, pp.215-216.

judgement. As Jill says, we can struggle to reconcile this threat of judgement with our proclamation of a forgiving and loving God.

Here I think what's absolutely essential is to distinguish the notion of judgement from that of condemnation. Mostly, when we accuse ourselves or someone else of being 'judgemental' we're conflating those terms. To be 'judgemental' means being critical, condemning, unforgiving, even merciless. But if we think about what it means to have good judgement, there is no necessary association with condemnation. Someone who has good judgement, a good judge of character for example, is just someone who sees how things really are. Good judgement is holistic – it sees strengths and weakness, shadow and light. It's connected with wisdom, discernment, clarity, truth.

In the New Testament, this is the sense in which Jesus is judge. He is the one who perceives truly the human heart – who sees beyond appearances. As such he is, as John's gospel puts it, the light by which people are enabled to discover what is true of themselves. In the light of his truthful, compassionate and holistic gaze, some discover they are more than they knew: they come to know they belong, they have a vocation, they're loved (I'm thinking of people like Mary Magdalene and Zaccheus the tax collector). Others discover that they're not all they believed themselves cracked up to be – as when the rich young ruler and Saul (who became Paul) realise through their encounters with Jesus that what they thought of as their virtue was actually riddled with shadow and self-deception. And most (like Peter, James and John) realise they're a pretty mixed bag.

It's true there is something binary in Jesus' judgement, his regard. He seeks to bring people to a point of choice, a sense of urgency about what they're making of themselves: 'this day I set before you life and death, choose life'. But always when he reveals the truth of people, he's looking not to condemn but to enable them to recognise and 'repent' of destructive ways. His judgement is in service of liberation and reconciliation, and it happens in the key of mercy – think of his return to the disciples in the resurrection bearing forgiveness and peace.

This means, writes Australian theologian Ben Myers: ‘The confession that Christ will come as judge is not an expression of terror and doom. It is part of the good news of the gospel. It is a joy to know that there is someone who understands all the complexities and ambiguities of our lives ... He comes to save, not to destroy, and he saves us by his judgement’.⁵ And I think we know something of this experience of the judge who is for us through our practice of meditation. As we grow in this way of prayer, as we open ourselves to the presence, the gaze of God, we slowly come to see ourselves and some of our habits of thought and being in a new light; we see how we get in the way of life – our own and others. We become conscious of an invitation to grow, to be changed. Sometimes this is painful, unsettling, disorienting. But ultimately it is liberating and healing: ‘the truth will set you free’. Our fullest life comes not because of God blandly legitimates all we do and say, but because we are trusted and called to become responsible for ourselves, to mature in truth and love.

But if this is the essential character of Christ’s judgement, what it’s for, then what of the notion that its outcome might be ‘hell’; that if we don’t make some cut-off date for repentance and amendment of life, we might be cast into the fiery furnace for all eternity. That doesn’t seem consistent at all with what I’ve just been saying ... as if Jesus is loving, forgiving, enabling to a point, and then suddenly – you’re punishingly damned. Well, here again I think we need to distinguish two things. There’s the hyperbolic, apocalyptic imagery in which the language of judgement is couched in parts of the New Testament, including in parables and sayings attributed to Jesus. I do not take this imagery literally, and even in the New Testament it’s in the process (James Alison has argued) of being subverted from within.⁶ By the time of John’s gospel, there’s a sense in which heaven and hell are not so much awaiting us at the end, as expressions of the quality of our relationship

⁵ Ben Myers, *The Apostles’ Creed: A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), p.93.

⁶ Alison describes this subversion of the apocalyptic imagination in terms of the recovery of a truly Christian eschatological imagination. *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co, 1996).

with God here and now. 'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life' (John 5.24).

But this brings us to the nub of things. Is it possible that there are some who will not pass from death to life? Even if it's not imaged as punishment or fiery torment, is 'hell' – understood, perhaps, as some definitive separation from God, some willful self-isolation and self-deception – is it real? Could it happen to any of us?

Well, what our tradition says is that if we take human freedom seriously, if we proclaim a God who refuses to coerce our participation and transformation, then it is a conceptual possibility that we may refuse God's truth and love. The existence of hell, a state of separation from God is – on this account – a corollary of human freedom, the freedom we're given to choose death rather than life. And yet, the truly Christian hope is that no one will persist in this refusal eternally; that even those who seem hardest of heart will ultimately soften, that the power of God's forgiving love will break through and heal all possible human resistance.

Is hell real? Theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar answered this way: though the church maintains 'that hell exists ...; nevertheless it is perfectly possible that there be nobody at all there'.⁷ And for this I believe we must pray.

⁷ Alison, *Raising Abel*, p.176. See also Walter Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life*, trans. William Madges (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), pp.106-107.