

# Homily for the Third Sunday in Advent

Preached at St. Bartholomew's, Woodinville, WA Sunday, December 16, 2007

In the Series of Advent Sermons on the 4 Last Things (Death, Judgment, Hell and Heaven), we literally reach the bottom today. We can't go any lower, so to speak, than Hell, so let us comfort ourselves with the knowledge that the only direction we can go from here is UP! I am sure you all appreciate the irony, of course, that most of American society has impatiently proceeded to an orgy of commerce by which it celebrates Christmas, while we here are talking about relatively dark things. The purpose of these sermons is not to terrorize everyone, but to merely impart the message that is found in Holy Scripture, and you will see that this message is ultimately one of great hope for us. (Are we going to die? Yes. Is there going to be a Judgment? Yes. Is there a Hell and a Heaven? Yes. But the most important question addressed by Scripture as far as we are concerned, Is there hope for us? And the answer is most emphatically, Yes!) While Advent is a solemn time of preparation, it is far from being a sad time. The celebration of the birth of the Saviour of the World will be that much sweeter for having prepared well during Advent, having more fully understood our need for him.

What is Hell? When we use a word like 'hell', we have to investigate the long history of the People of Faith, and that long history encompasses different languages and cultures. So, for a biblical definition of Hell, we start with the Old Testament, with Ancient Israel, and with two Hebrew words: *Sheol*, and *Gehenna*. *Sheol* was considered the place (or state) of all departed souls, those righteous and unrighteous. For those of you who have read some Greek mythology, *Sheol* might be compared to Hades. The Hebrew concept of *Sheol* is a descent from living, breathing consciousness into dust and oblivion (as in The Psalms), although there is already some hope expressed for resurrection in the Old Testament. (Job, Daniel) Now for *Gehenna*. *Gehenna* was a valley near Jerusalem, also known as the Valley of Hinnom. This valley had a tragic history. In early, pre-Israelite times, the inhabitants of Canaan used *Gehenna* as a place of human sacrifice. The evil religion practiced by those people, caused them to make their children to 'walk through the fire' to their god, Molech – in other words, they burned their children alive. Later on, even after Israel mostly succeeded in driving out or suppressing this religion and culture, *Gehenna* continued on as a place of refuse, a place where the fires of discarded rubble were constantly burning. Thus *Gehenna* came to represent a sort of universal place of eternal, fiery punishment for the wicked.

Now we go to the New Testament, and we find both *Sheol* (as a place where or state where the departed wait) and *Gehenna* (a place of eternal, fiery destruction). For a description of *Sheol*, we look to our Lord's parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. After death and the Particular Judgment\* (\*see Sermon on Judgment, 12/9/07), the lost enter a state of waiting. This

is a place of doom and torment and of waiting for the last judgment, that we know as Hell. However, since Jesus died on the cross and prepared a way for those who believe in him, there is another state of waiting, which is a state of blessedness and of rest. This we will take up next Sunday, and it is known to Christians as Heaven, Paradise, the Bosom of Abraham, and (in the sense that further growth may take place there) Purgatory. Between this state and Hell there is a great gulf fixed, so that passing from one to the other is not possible. However, Saint Peter writes that One did enter Hell itself to preach to the souls imprisoned. This event we refer to in our Apostles Creed, when we say that "He [Christ] descended into Hell." Hell is a temporary state of waiting, and the end of this waiting is the Last Judgment. In *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*, we find that Hell is cast into a Lake of Fire, and here we once again have *Gehenna*, eternal, fiery destruction.

The prospect of Hell (not to mention the Lake of Fire) is terrifying and repugnant to most people. Some have even said, "If God judges and destroys people that way, then I refuse to believe in a God like that!" Which brings up an important question, of course: who would go to Hell, according to Scripture, and why do they go there? The answer is always surprising to me: Hell is not even intended for mankind. St. Peter writes that Hell was originally reserved from before time for Satan and the angels that fell. However, these fallen angels are very industrious in our world today. When we observe at all of the horrific things that happen today, things that men do to each other: raping, stealing, murdering, betraying, terrorizing, destroying, committing all kinds of unkindnesses, hurts and wrongs against God and Neighbor, we can see that the fallen angels are determined to take as many people with them as possible. Those who will go with the fallen angels include unrepentant, obstinate sinners, those who persist to the grave in defiance and malice toward God and their neighbor; and, Apostates, those who have not kept faith with God, but have willfully, malignantly gone their own way. These are they who have been presented with the knowledge of God in some way, they have seen God ... and they have Hated him. They have tasted Heaven, but they choose Hell; they will it, it suits them, they prefer it over Heaven. Already during this life they create a sort of Hell on earth for themselves and for others. Dorothy Sayers writes: "...if with our whole selves we are determined to have nothing but self, God will, in the end, say, 'Take it'. God cannot, against our own will, force us into heaven ... [for then] heaven would then be a greater agony than hell – or rather, hell is heaven as seen by those who reject it: just as he agonies of the jealous are love, seen through the distorting illusion. We might adapt the definition of [medieval philosopher] Boethius and say: 'Hell is the perfect and simultaneous possession of one's own will for ever'." (Dorothy Sayers, from her *Introductory Papers on Dante*)

Who could possibly see God and yet hate him? Yet our Lord himself said of his contemporaries, including those who put him on trial and

crucified him, “they have seen and hated both me and my Father”. (Jn. 15:24) Plenty of people today hate God and they hate Jesus even more – if not by their words then by their actions. Edward Pusey writes, “hatred of God is in itself hell. “We were created for love, the love of our God, and of each other in God. To exist without love, without loving, without being loved, would in itself be unendurable misery. It would be an unnatural existence, which must be restless and miserable because unnatural and missing that for which it was created. Not to love, is to hate.” Pusey goes on to vividly imagine Hell, the “society of the damned”, and demonstrates how it is of their own making, and not of God’s making at all: “Gather in one in your mind an assembly of all those men or women, from whom, whether in history or in fiction, your memory most shrinks [*my note: we could probably start with those who sacrificed their own children, in the pre-Israelite Canaan*]; gather in mind all which is most loathsome, most revolting, the most treacherous, malicious, coarse, brutal, inventive, fiendish cruelty, unsoftened by any remains of human feeling; such as you could not endure for a single hour; conceive the fierce, fiery eyes of hate, spite, frenzied rage, ever fixed on you, glaring on you, looking you through and through with hate; sleepless in their horrible gaze; felt, if not seen, never turning from you, never to be turned from, except to quail under the like piercing sight of hate; hear those yells of blaspheming concentrated hate, as they echo along the lurid vault of hell; everyone hating everyone, and venting that hate unceasingly with every inconceivable expression of malignity; conceive all this, multiplied, intensified, reflected all around in every side; and, amid it, the special hatred of anyone who sins you shared, whom you thoughtlessly encouraged in sin, or taught some sin before unknown—a deathlessness of hate would be in itself everlasting misery. Yet a fixedness in that state, in which the hardened, malignant sinner dies, involves, without any further retribution of God, this endless misery.” (Edward Bouverie Pusey, from a Sermon on Matthew 25:46.)

All of this is so far removed from the wholesomeness of God’s Law, the Law of Love, summed up in the Love of God and of our Neighbor, that community of sharing and self-giving for which we were created, of which the Holy Communion is a foretaste. This short life presents us with so many moments, so many opportunities to Live and Walk in Divine Love, or to reject and to Hate Him in our words and actions, and then to continue eternally in that path we have chosen. In his *Four Quartets*, T. S. Eliot points out that we either burn with the Love of God, or we are burned by it. Hell is that restless, tortured existence outside of Love; whereas Heaven is living in and with the glow of God’s holiness and glory. For those who say “Yes” and “Amen” to God, this life can be a foretaste of Heaven, a growing in communion. This is not to say that the life of a Christian is without struggle. It is all about struggling against those forces that drag us down and away from our purpose.

And that is why we are so much in need of God’s Grace, now in the

Day of Salvation. And that's why the Advent Collect is so vivid and so real to me as I pray it each day of Advent, twice a day (as should each of you): *Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now an ever. Amen.*