
Refiner's Fire

Malachi 3.1-4

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 10 2006 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

If there's one thing we believe in in America, it's choice. Last week I preached about heaven, and I sensed a consensus around the Chapel that heaven was rather a good thing. But as the days of week go by, one's bound to think, surely there must be an alternative? Surely heaven can't have a monopoly? So this week I thought we'd have a look at that alternative. It's called hell.

There are good reasons for believing there's such a place or experience as hell. Most obviously, Jesus seems to refer to it a number of times, in the language of gnashing teeth, weeping, and the fiery furnace. And of course the book of Revelation is particularly vivid in its portrayal of the lake of fire and its contents of burning sulphur. The existence of hell underwrites a whole moral universe, in which those who have shunned the light and truth of Christ and the gospel and particularly those who have made life a living hell for others on earth reap the rewards of their evil deeds. Those who turn to God in anger and dismay when cruelty and malice seem to prevail can find a certain comfort that not only are the good vindicated on the last day but that the evil are roundly punished.

There are broadly three ways of conceiving of hell. The first is the endless, bloodthirsty torment of body, mind and spirit that has captured the religious imagination over so many centuries and is the stuff of nightmares, graveyard humor and revivalist preaching. This version sometimes appears with significant exceptions – for example it's relatively common among advocates of eternal damnation to have get-out clauses for infants, for those who have never had a chance to hear the gospel, or even for those who have been faithful adherents of other faiths.

The second kind of hell is a modified version of the first. It makes a distinction between the references the New Testament makes to hell as a time or place of agony and remorse, and the somewhat fewer references in which that time or place of agony and remorse is described as permanent. The modified notion of hell sees it as a finite time of punishment or preparation, sometimes known as purgatory.

The third kind of hell recoils from the traditional emphasis on physical torment and sees punishment as simply annihilation. After death, those who are written in the book of life go to eternal blessedness, while those whose names are not to be found in glory simply drop out of existence. They don't rot, or scream, or curse – they just cease to be. A modified form of this annihilation proposal is that hell is the experience of the absence of God. This is a mixture of the first kind, the agony and remorse, with the third kind, the oblivion and obliteration. The absence of God is truly eternal hell, but it seems to spare those with refined tastes of the grisliness of howling screams and boiling oil.

There are two main reasons why hell is a theological and philosophical problem. The first we could call the moral objection. What kind of a god takes delight in consigning people to eternal damnation? Is it possible to imagine the God who formed us and called us and came among us and transformed us turning round and consigning us to perpetual horror? At the very least there seems to be a problem of proportionate response here. However ghastly the crime (and the twentieth century saw a good number of unspeakable atrocities), surely it could be paid off after the first 50 million years in hell? Isn't eternal punishment a little excessive? It's hard to see how anyone could be happy in heaven forever knowing that eternal damnation was still going on downstairs.

The second objection to hell we could call the sovereignty problem. If God is all-powerful, how is it possible that things ultimately turn out differently to the way he wants them to go? Once we have ruled out the vindictive, merciless picture of God and thus assumed God wants all people to go to heaven, the suggestion that some never make it presents a major theological problem. How could God allow some aspect of his creation somehow to be lost forever? It's no use saying this is about free will, because it's simply not possible to imagine anyone choosing eternal damnation, however limited the rest of the menu, and however unstable or antagonized they were at the point of choosing.

These two philosophical objections to hell are pretty overwhelming, because they strike at the two most fundamental Christian assumptions about God – that God is all loving and all powerful. The existence of hell implies that God isn't all loving, otherwise he couldn't consign parts of his creation to eternal damnation, and that God isn't all powerful, otherwise he'd be able to bring their torment to an end whenever he saw fit. The notion of eternal hell implies not just that there comes a point where we can't change our mind but that God is as constrained as we are.

I think we should be wary of the first objection. There's always a danger of reducing God to our own size. It's obviously a mistake to project onto God all our anger and frustration and assume God gives the people we don't like a really hard time forever. But it's also dangerous to concoct a list of polite and genteel and fashionable virtues and say God is just a big version of that. God is our definition of good. If there is a hell, we have to believe that's all part of God's loving economy, whether we understand it or not.

But the logic of the second objection is a whole lot more convincing. The major flaw in arguments for hell is that they take evil so seriously they make it more significant than good. The reason I don't talk more about the Devil is because the Devil always ends up sounding more interesting than God. And I want to talk about God. At the heart of God is Jesus. And Christians believe that in Jesus, particularly in his death and resurrection, God defeated sin, death and the devil. But the existence of an everlasting hell suggests that there is something God didn't defeat in Jesus – some part of eternal existence that continues to hold out against God, a part of God's economy that refuses to abide by his grace. Again, it's no use saying this is a matter of free will, that if people weigh up the pros and cons and plump for eternal damnation God loves them enough to let them go. That would be putting human choice at the center of the universe, instead of God's grace. Surely the character of God's grace, the wonder of God's grace is that God finds a way to draw back into his glory even those who are dead set against his kingdom and his love. The heart of the problem of hell is that it suggests God didn't achieve everything in Jesus, that the gift of Jesus didn't somehow give us everything we need, that there's still somewhere a fundamental, eternal estrangement from God.

So how do we listen obediently to the words of Scripture that speak of fire and torment and gnashing of teeth, and on the other hand believe not just that Jesus shows us the character of God but that God achieved everything in Jesus? I suggest the key lies in today's words from the prophet Malachi. "Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness". I want you to think about this picture of a refiner's fire.

I want you to consider that the line between good and evil lies not like a thread through society, between good and evil persons, those destined for heaven and those destined for hell. I'd like to you to suppose instead that it goes through every single human being. And I'd like you to imagine that there is indeed a fire which burns, not eternally, but until the last day. And that after we die, every little piece of us that has not turned to the glory of God, every tiny part of our history or character, every word or thought or deed that shrinks from God's grace is burned off by the refiner's fire. And that means that when that process is finished not all of our earthly self gets to heaven. But not none of it, either, even among the worst that humanity has produced. Out of such as remains from the refiner's fire, God remakes a heavenly body fit for worship, friendship and eating with him forever.

For the Mother Teresa and the Francis of Assisi, we can imagine there's very little burnt off, and the refiner's fire is pretty much a painless process. They have accepted the forgiveness of God and been transformed by the sanctification of the Holy Spirit. They're pretty much in the clear and in heaven they'll be instantly recognizable. But the Adolf Hitler and the Joseph Stalin are another matter. Almost everything in them, so we imagine, turned away from the grace and transforming love of God in Christ, and forgiveness was something they never sought. But here's the twist. Because God created them, because they emerged from God's creative purpose, we cannot simply say they are evil without giving up on the all-pervasive grace of God. So what we say is that for people like them the refiner's fire is an agonizing and almost total experience, and that what's left is pretty much unrecognizable. It takes God to the very limits of his grace to make something beautiful and heavenly out of the scant and desolate remains that emerge from the refiner's fire. And what does appear in

heaven after God's astonishing work is almost unrecognizable from the earthly person that perpetrated so much that desecrated the name of God.

So that's what hell is. Hell is not an eternal horror that abides forever as a scar on the face of God's glory. Hell is a refiner's fire, from which that in us that has been soaked in God's forgiveness and transforming sanctification moves on quite rapidly, but in which that in us that has turned away from the glory of God remains being prepared to meet God for as long as it takes until the job is done. The punishment, if that's the right word, for the Hitlers and the Stalins and indeed for everything in each of us that we call sin, the punishment is that by the time it gets to heaven it's unrecognizable from its earthly self. And the less you allow yourself to be changed by the grace and transforming love of God in this life, the more agonizing and more radical the change will be when you leave this life.

Where is Jesus in this refining fire? The answer is that Jesus is at the heart of the refining fire. Can you imagine that the work of the refining fire is easy? Can you imagine what it costs God painstakingly to eradicate everything in us that turns from him and even more painstakingly to reconfigure a new person based on however little is left after the fire? This is to take on total alienation from God and try to transform even that alienation into something beautiful and glorious and truly heavenly. This is exactly what Jesus wanted to say no to as he knelt in Gethsemane. This is exactly what took Jesus to Calvary. This is exactly what was taking place on the cross. Jesus literally went through hell for us. Jesus on the cross was taking upon himself all in each one of us that turns away from the glory of God – all the sin of the world.

On the cross Jesus was in the refiner's fire, burning with agony so that he could refashion each one of us for heaven. The astonishing thing is that in Jesus doesn't just enter the fire and make something wonderful from our ordinary and limited humanity. He even makes something out of the ashes. Somehow, once the fire has done its work, God in Christ transforms even the lost. And in the resurrection we see in Jesus God's grace and commitment to give each one of us a restored and transformed identity once the refiner's fire has done its work. Even the risen Jesus wasn't identical to his pre-crucifixion self. How much different many of us may be. But because of Jesus, hell is not God's last word on sin. So the more we focus on the cross, the less we think about hell. Jesus really did change everything.

This is a picture of hell that stays true to the scriptural imagery, stays true to our faith in the self-giving and loving character of God, and stays true to our belief in the almightiness of God. Most importantly, it brings us closer to the wonder of what God gives us in Jesus Christ. This is a faith that leaves us not trembling in agonized fear, or cozy in judgemental complacency, but lost in wonder, love and praise. And that's a big part of how we know it's true.

I want to do something I don't usually do, and finish with a prayer. It's a prayer that unites the theme of this week's sermon about hell and last week's sermon about heaven. It's a prayer that sums up the intent of both sermons, which is to say that the way to think about heaven and hell is to focus on the God of Jesus Christ, and not to settle for anything less. It's a prayer that I hope will become as precious to you as it is to me. So here goes: Loving God, if I love thee for hope of heaven, then deny me heaven; if I love thee for fear of hell, then give me hell; but if I love thee for thyself alone, then give me thyself alone. Amen.