

Sermon

Sunday 28th September, 2008

Lessons Exodus 17: 1 – 7 Philippians 2: 1 – 11 St Matthew 21: 23 – 32

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Prepare our hearts, O God, to accept Your Word.
Silence in us any voice but Your own,
that, hearing, we may also obey Your will;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

St Paul wrote: Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow.....And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2: 9ff

Do you believe in eternal punishment? This morning I want to talk about repentance, but first a word about eternal punishment. This is why you come to Mayfield Salisbury: to hear about eternal punishment! Hell is the place for unrepentant sinners. In Christianity and Islam, Hell is depicted as fiery and painful, inflicting guilt and suffering. In Judaism, Hell or *sheol* is nothingness. Punishment in Hell is typically proportionate to the sins committed in this life for which there has been no repentance and no forgiveness. Can we believe that St Augustine, easily one of the Church's greatest theologians of all time, said that in Hell unbaptised infants would suffer less than unbaptised adults? All the unbaptised would suffer in Hell, he said, because, being unbaptised, God would deny them entry into Heaven. Dante's *Inferno* portrays the innermost or ninth circle of Hell as a frozen lake of blood and guilt. Sometimes Hell is portrayed as populated with demons who torment the damned. It

is the place of eternal punishment. It is the place where the souls of the unsaved suffer the consequences of their sin. Do you believe in eternal punishment?

The poet Stevie Smith was a devout Anglican. She loved Christianity. As she got older, however, she grew doubtful of some of the doctrines of the Church. In particular, she came to feel that certain aspects of Christianity were immoral. This was nowhere more true than with the belief in eternal punishment. She said that eternal, everlasting punishment, could not be believed and had to be rejected. The poet wrote:

And the penal sentences of Christ: He that believeth
And is baptised shall be saved, he that believeth not
Shall be damned. Depart from me ye cursed into everlasting fire
Prepared for the devil and his angels. And then
Saddest of all the words in scripture, the words,
They went away into everlasting punishment. Is this good?

Outside the city wall of Jerusalem of Old and New Testament times, there was a large, deep valley, next to the Kidron Valley, called *Gehenna*. *Gehenna* was the city rubbish dump. The rubbish smouldered day and night. It is from *Gehenna* that we get the concept of the fiery pit and the metaphor that the souls of the dead, of unrepentant sinners, will burn in Hell, will burn in the fiery pit. Do you believe in Hell, eternal punishment, the place for the unsaved, for unrepentant sinners?

Dr Samuel Johnson, said by some to be the most distinguished man of letters in English history, lived in the eighteenth century, in the age of enlightenment. His

biographer records this most remarkable exchange when Johnson returned to Pembroke, Oxford, for a visit:

Dr Johnson surprised him not a little, by acknowledging with a look of horror that he was much oppressed by the fear of death. The amiable Dr Adams suggested that God was infinitely good. Johnson [replied] ‘That he is infinitely good as far as the perfection of his nature will allow, I certainly believe; but it is necessary for good upon the whole, that individuals should be punished. As to an individual, therefore, he is not infinitely good; and as I cannot be sure that I have fulfilled the conditions on which salvation is granted, I am afraid I may be one of those who shall be damned.’ (looking dismally) Dr Adams [said] ‘What do you mean damned?’ Johnson (passionately and loudly) [said], ‘Sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly....Mrs Adams [said], ‘You seem, Sir, to forget the merits of our Redeemer.’ Johnson [answered] ‘Madam I do not forget the merits of my Redeemer; but my Redeemer has said that he will set some on his right hand and some on his left.’

I cannot believe that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ will send one or any of His children to unending fire. All theology is a human exercise, from St Paul and St Augustine to Karl Barth and John Shelby Spong. Almost always the concepts of Hell and Satan, the fiery pit and the demons, are theological attempts to hold on to the goodness of God while explaining the injustice, evil and suffering in the world. Theologians have tried to separate God, who is good, from evil and sin. We have this over-riding moral belief that wrong-doing must be punished, penal sentences must be handed out, and God, the Eternal Judge, will hand out eternal rewards or punishments as we deserve. All theology, from St Paul to Spong, has the potential to become an idol, a human construct which we worship and before which we bow down. While it is true that God is always beyond our best understanding I would argue that we have to believe that there is a consistency, an integrity, between the values of this world and the values of God. In other words, if we believe that God is love, that in Christ, God

promises us His love and healing, wholeness and forgiveness, then we have good reason to believe Him. St John wrote:

God is love; he who dwells in him is dwelling in God, and God in him. This is for us the perfection of love, to have confidence on the day of judgement, and this we can have, because even in this world we are as he is.

We have good reason to believe that His nature is eternal love and that that will hold true not only for this life but for all eternity. However theologians arrived at the doctrine of Hell, fiery pit, demons with horns and long-pointed tails, and the prospect of no release from the fires, I believe that they are wrong. St Paul wrote:

For all who are moved by the Spirit of God are sons of God. The Spirit you have received is not a spirit of slavery leading you back into a life of fear, but a Spirit that makes us sons, enabling us to cry, 'Abba! Father!'

No loving, caring, human parent would send their child to unending fire: God can never be morally less than we are. I do want now to talk about repentance but let us be clear: fiery pits are out!

John Milton said of repentance, 'Repentance is the golden key that opens the palace of eternity.' The writer, Lewis Wallace, wrote, 'Repentance must be something more than mere remorse for sins; it comprehends a change of nature befitting heaven.'

And, Dwight Lyman Moody, (D L Moody) said:

Man is born with his face turned away from God. When he truly repents, he is turned right round toward God; he leaves his old life.

Moody is not far off the mark. Biblical repentance means to make a deliberate decision, to turn and walk in obedience to God. The fiery pit may have gone but the

decision to know God remains ours. We have the possibility and potential to enjoy life in all its fullness. In reflecting on what it means to be saved, the late J K Thomson said this:

Being saved does not...mean being saved from a hell after death. It means being saved from things here, from the menace to our life and peace, of things inside us, and things without.....It means being saved *into* a different, better kind of life, a kind of life that, in our best moments, we long for. It means not only being saved from unclean thoughts, but saved into a purity of heart on which the appeal of the unclean falls dead. It means not only being saved from ugliness of gross selfishness, but saved into the beauty of self-forgetfulness and considerate patience and genuine kindness. By salvation, the New Testament means deliverance from weakness to strength, from fear to confidence and courage, from despair to hope that nothing can take away. In short, from what we are, into something of the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Thomson illustrates his point by telling the story of Blondin, the tight-rope walker, who crossed the Niagara Falls. Having walked the rope, his next daring thing was to walk across pushing a man in a wheelbarrow. Having done that, he decided to perform that feat again only this time with a friend in the wheelbarrow. The friend refused. 'Don't you believe that I can do it?' asked Blondin. 'Of course, I believe that,' said his friend. 'I have seen you do it.' 'Why won't you come then?' asked Blondin. His friend shook his head and said, 'No, not me. I'm not going to risk it.'

Thomson said:

The friend, you see, believed that Blondin could do it, but would not trust him to do it in his own case. Perhaps it is that way between you and Jesus. You believe that He has saved others [but you won't trust Him.]

David Livingstone on his last but one birthday wrote in his diary, 'O Jesus, my Lord, my King, my All, I again dedicate my whole life to Thee.' Not a bad thing to say on

your birthday. Not a bad thing to say on any day. Not a bad thing to say everyday!

This may be a church which flaunts its liberal theology and I may be a preacher who has lost patience with the theology of an interventionist god, who regularly demythologises Bible stories, who has no time or tolerance for the morality of right-wing conservative theology and who does not believe in Hell – if the pope can do away with *Limbo* then I can do away with Hell – but, but that does not ever relieve us of the need to make commitment, total and personal commitment, to Jesus, to meditating upon Him and to seeking Him ourselves through Scripture and Sacrament.

It is often impossible to know the specific will of God in our lives but I do believe that it is possible to know God. One writer said of Holy Communion:

God comes, intimately, personally, with all His power and love, right down into the centre of our being where the springs of life and thought come up, and when He comes it is with healing and blessing and pacifying power, to put all in order, to make holy and strong and pure, what we so often drag down and wear out and misuse, our very soul and substance. So you see it is not a case of saying beautiful things to Him, of saying anything at all, but, all battered and wearied and dejected as we are, it is only a case of wanting and receiving Him, and the work is done without any words.

Repentance does mean exercising our best morality, our most humane morality. It does mean being careful about the importance we attach to our theology in case it becomes an idol we worship. Repentance does mean treating as holy each human being, however much we dislike them, however aware we are of their faults.

Repentance does mean turning to Jesus.

Let me close with these words from Thomas á Kempis. I offer them by way of instruction and for meditation:

When Jesus is present, all is well, and nothing seemeth difficult;
but when Jesus is absent, every thing is hard.
When Jesus speaketh not inwardly, we have no true comfort;
but if Jesus speak but one word, we feel much consolation.

What can the world profit thee without Jesus?
To be without Jesus is a grievous hell, and to be with Jesus a sweet paradise.
If Jesus be with thee, no enemy can hurt thee.
He that findeth Jesus, findeth a good treasure, yea a good above all goods:
And he that loseth Jesus, loseth too much, and much more than
the whole world.
He is most poor, that liveth without Jesus: and he is most rich, that is well
with Jesus.

It is a great skill to know to converse with Jesus, and great wisdom to know
to keep Jesus.
Be humble and peaceable, and Jesus will be with thee.
Be devout and quiet, and Jesus will stay with thee.

It is better for thee to have all the world against thee, than Jesus offended
with thee.
Of all things that are dear to thee therefore, let Jesus alone be peculiarly
thy beloved.

Amen.