



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year C-September 29th 2019

***Readings: Amos 6: 1. 4-7, Psalm 145, 1 Timothy 6:11-16,
Luke 16: 19-31***

A few weeks ago, at the end of Mass, I was at the door. An elderly couple, visitors, stopped to thank me for the sermon.

This was all very gratifying and jolly until the man added:

‘Of course, just one thing. You mentioned, in passing, Purgatory. I don’t believe in that.’

‘Oh dear’, I replied. ‘I hope you’re not planning to go to Heaven as you are – and spoil it!’

Stung by this unwelcome correction, our visitor launched into deep water.

‘While we are on the subject,’ he continued, ‘I don’t believe in Hell either.’ Modern people are frequently agnostic about Purgatory because they do not know the relevant Scriptural texts and have not had full Catholic catechism. Hell is quite another matter.

‘But, if you don’t believe in the reality of Hell’, I replied, ‘This puts you in radical disagreement with Jesus who spoke about Hell more than anyone else in the whole of Scripture.’

This went down like a lead balloon – by this stage his wife had hidden herself behind the door.

To cut the long story short, I had got it wrong. Not that the Jesus of the Bible didn't mention this inconvenient subject a lot BUT..... we couldn't trust the Bible as a record of what He said and did. The whole thing turned out to be a house of cards. I suggested that the correct response to such a reality was to pull down the churches and stop deceiving people then.

In desperation my man reverted to his original line.

'Look here, father, I only stopped to compliment you on your sermon.'

'Very kind of you, but this is more important. This is a matter of life and death.'

I mention this conversation because, in its extremity, it unveils a lot of the slipshod theological thinking that was doing the rounds at my time in seminary and because it reveals how quickly the coherence of salvation in Christ unravels in the mind of the modernist.

Nor is it just in the mind of the modernist. I recently read a truly beautiful theological work by a renowned Catholic professor on the afterlife. When he got to Hell, circumlocution went into overdrive, poetry replaced plain Biblical fact. He teetered on the very edge of Universalism – all will be saved. The flow of theological wisdom guttered into the sentimental outpourings of a bad afternoon at the crematorium.

His problem was that he could not believe in a God that was not at least as nice as he was. God would want all men to be saved. Correct. God would want Hell to be empty. Correct.

But we must not stop there. God is god. He is not some creature like us. We must not anthropomorphise God into a good bloke. He is the glorious all powerful creator of all worlds. He is the source of all that is. He is a God of justice. The sins of this life, small or great, demand recompense and atonement.

God is a god of love. Love is only truly love if it is free. You cannot force love. We are given the option- love God or reject Him, love Him or cut ourselves off from our origin and our intended end. God is a god of freedom. Do we use our freedom to choose life and love or do we turn away? The choice, right to the last, even from the cross next to Jesus, is ours.

Indeed if Hell does not exist then Heaven will be full of the careless and the indifferent, the ungrateful and the wicked.

If Hell does not exist, why did Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, come amongst us and suffer and die for our sins. His atonement on the Cross becomes a tasteless joke. If Hell does not exist the Church is reduced to a pointless gathering of people who like that sort of thing because its *raison d'être*, evangelism, the salvation of souls is already secured.

Jesus Himself clearly does not think like that. Time and again He returns to the theme of the urgency of salvation. The unprepared bridesmaids shut out from the feast. The forgiven but unforgiving debtor doomed to eternal prison. The self indulgent rich man who ignores the beggar at his gate as well as the commandments of God. These are terrifying pictures of the life that rejects God's mercy and lives in despite of Him.

Jesus often refers to Hell as Gehenna. This is the Valley of Hinnom, the rubbish dump of Jerusalem – a place of rot and burning and ultimate disposal. In the times of Israel's frequent reversion to idolatry, it was the place where children were sacrificed to the vicious pagan gods. It was, quite literally, the place where the future perished.

The Gospel demands that we do not retreat to a bogus sentimentalism about the plight of Man. We are sin sick. We need salvation. Without the atonement of Christ we cannot hope to stand before God and dwell with Him in eternity. Without His justice and righteousness then God Himself

would be no better than the ghastly projections of ourselves that created the idols of false gods. Without His sacrificial love we cannot know a future in which Man, made in His image, can be reconciled, redeemed, restored.

This is the urgency of the Gospel. It is all of a piece. It is coherent. It is whole. It is glorious. Let us, unafraid, preach the love of Heaven first. But let us not forget the beauty of the fire of God's love in the Purification nor the terrible pit below the Holy City where the impenitent sacrifice their future.