

Hell on Earth? A sermon for Jesus College Oxford, Sunday 5 March 2017 5.45pm

2 Sam 22:1-25;

Mark 8:31-38

In nomine...

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell.

So, today: crucified, dead, buried, Hell.

Or, to trim it down, simply Hell. Because you could say there are two kinds of Hell: the Afterlife (which surely we should in fact call the Afterdeath); and the Hell on Earth - our deepest darkest experiences of suffering – like Jesus' own suffering - experiences that we think might just as well be hell.

Is there such a thing as hell on earth? Sometimes it can feel like there's nothing beyond our current suffering. That is to say, we suffer, we die, and that's that. Nothing. So the only Hell there can truly be is the hell we live through in our lifetimes on earth. Which yes, surely, can sometimes feel like hell.

But that doesn't actually do justice to our experience of life. Even when life is at its most hellish, there is love lurking, somewhere, I promise you. Even when we are walking through the shadow of death, as Ps 23 would put it, there are moments of life, hiding perhaps, but they're definitely there, I give you my word. Even when our grief, our pain, our deep hurts overwhelm us, there are still less hellish things beyond where we're currently at: our very presence to each other, encroaching on one another's lives, points to just that. Our own personal hell can never be the end of anyone's story.

So the idea of Hell on Earth cannot do complete justice to the idea of Hell (with a capital H). Let's begin with some images of Hell in popular culture. Classical mythology comes up with great stories about Tartarus, their Underworld. There were the Danaides, sisters who killed their husbands, kept on having carry water in jugs so they could wash away their sins - but the bath was cracked and hence they could never fill it up. Sisyphus, who killed a whole load of his own house guests, was sentenced to roll a boulder up a hill - but every time he nearly got to the top, it rolled away from him and back down to the bottom so he had to start again. Tityos, who attempted rape, was punished in Hell by having his liver pecked out for all eternity.

Depictions of Hell in medieval wall-paintings have devils and demons and fire and pain and agony. It was considered a sure fire way to get people to behave better in this life, to be good Christians, to avoid such a future. A kind of modern equivalent is that photo on the Chapel Facebook page this weekend, which is actually a place on earth, called "The Gates of Hell", a massive gas crater in the Turkmenistan desert which has been burning for 45 years now. Hell in many traditions is thought of as a fiery torment.

But another explanation - which is perhaps easier for us to get our twenty-first century rational heads around - is that Hell is an absence of God. Now, anyone who doesn't really know God will perhaps think they live without God at the moment anyway, so what does it matter? Well, let me tell you, whatever is good, whatever is loving, whatever is generous, whatever is the essence of life - God is there. So hell is, I suggest, a place where God is simply absent. You think you already live without God? Know it or not, you don't. You think you want to live without God? Realise it or not, you so don't.

And if that's the case, then there can be no such thing as Hell on Earth. Because if - as the Psalmist says, as King David says in our reading from 2 Samuel today - if there is no place on earth where God cannot get to, then there can be no such thing as hell on earth, however appalling our experiences of earthly life might be. Even in the worst moments of our lives, there is the possibility of God's presence.

Which makes this line in the creed even more powerful. Why did Jesus go down to Hell? *How* did he go down to Hell, if Hell is an absence of God? It's not like he had to be punished or anything. He'd already been unjustly punished by being beaten up and mocked and crucified, then buried in a hurry because it was the Sabbath. No - early Christians built the tradition that Jesus went down to hell to pick up those who had already died and who needed to be brought beyond death - not into Hell, but into its very opposite. Jesus's love went beyond even the bounds of Hell.

There's no place Jesus won't go for us. There's no experience he won't have for us. There's no place where we can go where he can't rescue us. It's only because of his crucifixion and death that Jesus can go *even to the no-God place* in order to restore the faithful to their relationship with God.

Indeed, you could say, Jesus went to hell and back for us. Because his passion, crucifixion and death were hellish torment in themselves. But he didn't even stop there. He did hell on earth, in his torture and crucifixion, which ended only with his burial; *and* he did Hell *beyond* earth - Hell with a Capital H.

I've already mentioned our first reading today - which I'm sure you'll be interested to know, is almost exactly also the same text as Psalm 18. This has imagery of fire, deep waters, the grave, natural disaster, darkness, violence, and a sense of being trapped.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word that's often translated as "distress", "tsar", is actually about being cramped, trapped, squeezed, not having enough space. So when in verse 20 David finally sings that God has brought him out in a spacious place, that is a way of saying that his troubles are ended, his great distress is over.

Let's think about that picture for a moment. We talk about being in "dire straits". Being trapped between a rock and a hard place. Only a few days ago a friend described hell as a gorge, a ravine, where there was only one way to go: narrow, with treacherous rocks on either side. Churchill once said "If you're going through hell, keep going". And surely WW2

was the closest you could get to an experience of hell on earth. But keep going. Keep going along that narrow and painful path.

After all, the way of the cross, for Jesus, was just that. If you've ever been to Jerusalem, perhaps you've walked the *Via Dolorosa*. It runs through narrow and crowded streets, even through the *souk*. Jesus had the one way to go. In the Gospel of John, Jesus carries his own cross; in the other three Gospels, Simon of Cyrene is press-ganged into carrying it for him. Carrying a cumbersome means of execution through those streets would have felt like walking through a ravine of death indeed.

It's precisely this vision that Jesus looks forward to when he commands his followers in our Gospel reading from Mark today, to deny self, to take up the cross, and to follow. To let go of the things that will hamper us in narrow and difficult places. To follow the example of Christ. To dare to tread those straits of distress. To have the courage to go in Jesus' footsteps. Only by that means can we go to hell - *and back*.

Sometimes our journey of life feels hellish. Whether it's illness or bereavement, immense stress or great loss, sometimes we do, or we will, feel that it's all hellish. For most of us, there's no escaping times that feel like hell on earth. But if you walk through that ravine in the footsteps of Christ, who has already made that journey in the flesh in the narrow streets of Jerusalem, then whatever your personal hell, it's not the end of the story. It's not Hell with a Capital H. Because Christ stops at nothing for us. He goes all the way with us. He goes all the way *for us*. He goes to hell - and back - *for us*. He goes to hell and back *instead of us*.

As King David sang in our OT reading, "The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge."

Even in the narrow *Via dolorosa*, the direst of straits, God is there. Jesus has walked before. Take the metaphorical rocks of an earthly experience of the ravine of hell. Even amongst these rocks – especially amongst these rocks, you could say – God is there. It's perhaps no

small coincidence that while straits in Hebrew are “tsa-r”, the word for rock is “tsoor”.
God my Rock. God my “tsoor”.

Hell on earth? We do go through hellish experiences, yes. But we cannot, this side of death, go through experiences which are Hell with a capital H – because God is always with us. Inescapably so. Hell is simply a place without God, an experience of not even the possibility of God, if that’s at all imaginable.

Remember the other name of Jesus who was crucified, dead, and buried, who descended into Hell. Jesus, “our Emmanuel”, literally, “God with us”. So – take up your cross, and follow him. We will never face Hell if we go with our Emmanuel.