

**Sunday 23 July 2017**

**The Sixth Sunday after Trinity**

**Genesis 28: 10-19a Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43**

Today's gospel lesson suggests that saints and sinners must live together in relative peace and tolerance until some event at the end of time when God will separate the sheep from the goats and some of us will go to heaven and others will go to hell. And, of course, those of gathered here this morning in Winchmore Hill must surely be amongst the saints and therefore have our passport to heaven.

But how would we feel if, at this event, whatever it is, at the end of time, God takes a look at us all and decides to give us all the benefit of the doubt and welcomes us all into the kingdom of heaven?

How would those of us who used to get up early on a Sunday morning and troop along to church when everyone else luxuriated in bed react if we saw all those vagabonds and sinners marching through the pearly gates alongside us? Would we feel hard done by?

I have to say that I, for one, would feel an enormous sense of relief – not only because I was marching through the pearly gates but because the sight of everyone else there with me would indicate to me that the God of love in whom I had placed my trust was indeed a God of love and not the God of wrath and judgement which some of my more zealous and perhaps ruthless religious brethren had depicted.

I am what is grandly termed a universalist which means that I believe that God has redeemed the whole of his creation through Christ and that he will ultimately draw the whole of that creation back to himself in the realm of life which we call the Kingdom.

I don't believe in hell – at least not the fiery furnace kind of hell which has been a favourite of preachers as well as artists and writers for ever.

That's a tricky one for people who like things to be clear and concise; for people who like rules and rewards; for people who want a goal not only in this life but also in the one to come.

Someone once asked, 'If everyone is saved, why bother?' to which the answer must be '*Unless everyone is saved, why bother?*' The nineteenth century philosopher John Stuart Mill talked about preferring the idea of hell than eternity with a God who sent people there.

At St Paul's Cathedral, we have sessions for teenagers who visit the cathedral with their schools called 'Big Issues' and it's where the teenagers get 45 minutes with a member of the clergy to ask them about the big issues of the day. We sometimes call it 'grill a canon' and it can certainly feel like that. The young people are bright and inquisitive and no question is too big that they won't ask it. And one of the questions I get asked a lot is about heaven and hell. What is heaven like? What is hell like? They are often surprised – and perhaps relieved – when I tell them that I don't believe in hell and when I tell them about my universalism. And inevitably the question comes back 'What about Hitler?' It's a fair question and my answer might sound like I'm ducking the question when I say that my only option when faced with that particular question is to leave the matter to God.

And the question – as well as my answer – reminds me of a poem by the mid-twentieth century poet Edwin Muir called 'Transfiguration' in which he talks about the transforming power of God – so transformative and so powerful that, even in the case of Judas, all the wrong done is undone and never done again. The passage of time is reversed and Judas is a child again by his mother's knee – and all the wrong done undone and never done again.

So where is Judas? Heaven or hell? You'll have to ask God.

Some of my more zealous religious brothers and sisters are nervous of my stance: what right have I to undo the mediaeval theology of the Church at my own whim? But why are they nervous? Quite often I think that their nervousness is a lack of confidence in their own faith. The word confidence means quite literally 'full of faith' and a lack of confidence can make religious people turn to neat cut and dried arguments based on certainty that use the

concept of reward and punishment to make people follow their own religious systems – often I think to the detriment of personal relationship with God.

This is a loose way of talking about the religious laws of purity that are key planks of many religious people's approach to faith. Codes of behaviour, relating to things like diet and dress and of course sex, are neat ways of controlling people and of marking people out as being either 'in' or 'out' in terms of membership of a community of faith: the iron bands of certainty that seem to me to imprison people in their faith rather than setting people free through faith to live the lives God has given them to the full – in the service of God and to the greater glory of God.

And how do you make people observe the religious laws of purity? You tell them all about hell.

Well, I don't think the religious laws of purity have served faith very well over the years and especially not now when extremism has polarised people between hard and ugly religion in one corner and no faith at all in the other corner.

How about we show enormous faith and enormous confidence and let it all go: religious laws of purity and hell and, instead, do justice, love kindness and walk humbly before God? I am not denying this morning's gospel lesson at all. I do think God will judge us all – the wheat and the weeds – but the judgment will not be about who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. It will be about what we feel inside ourselves as we stand there, accounting for our time in the field of life. How much justice and kindness and humility did we show? Do you want to stand tall at that moment before the God who loves you so much that he gave his only Son or do you want to crawl away into a corner and die? That's a much more powerful and much more realistic way of encouraging us in our faith and in our response to faith now in this world than a fading mediaeval wall painting in a church from a bygone age.

'If everyone is saved, why bother?' — 'Unless everyone is saved, why bother?'

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