

Sermon – 2nd before Advent, St James St Johns All Saints

Matt 25:14-30

15 Nov 2020

Last Saturday, my wife and I took our little dog for his ‘COVID Lockdown #2’ exercise to Wavering Down, a nearby hill with a commanding vista of the surrounding area. In the far distance, we saw the twinkling light of a bonfire and watched as fireworks began to soar into the sky - November 5th is an annual celebration here in the UK. Meanwhile in the USA, people had been casting their vote for their choice of future president. Fire and choice – these are two themes that re-occur as we approach Advent, since the next two Sundays contain consecutive readings from Matthew’s gospel. These themes both occur as Matthew deals with the issue of Hell. As Christians, we don’t like to talk about Hell because it appears to sit uncomfortably with our notion that God is love. It raises questions like, ‘If God created everything, why did he create hell’ or ‘how could a God of love allow Hell?’. Take moment to reflect on what you might say in response.



The traditional image of Hell is one of fire and brimstone, smoke and torment, as captured by Hieronymus Bosch, painting in the 1400s. There are some Bible references that appear to back that view up: – the lake of fire in the book of Revelation; the ‘*place of weeping and gnashing of teeth*’

described by Christ in our reading today; the ‘*eternal punishment*’ in next week’s reading. But our gospel writer Matthew is inviting us to look more deeply than a surface-skim of just three verses, and it’s easy to miss what Jesus was conveying because we don’t have the Jewish context that Matthew assumes his recipients benefit from. As many of you know, the new Vicarage is within a new housing development here in Winscombe. This is very exciting for us as a family and also as a church community for mission in the future. However, one of the difficulties of living on a new housing estate is getting your recycling and household waste collected when the postcode is so new it doesn’t appear on maps. One of the Hebrew words Jesus used for Hell is *Gehenna*, and the citizens of Jerusalem knew where and what it was. It was just outside of the city, the place where the waste and refuse of the city was taken to be burnt. In Jesus’ time, there was no council truck to collect the weekly recycling, and fire was the medium by which waste was consumed. *Gehenna*: the place outside the Holy City where that which didn’t belong was reduced to nothing.

It’s easy to see the ‘talents’ mentioned in today’s reading as directly relating to financial stewardship. But as we saw in our ‘God of our story’ Bible series recently, God loves humanity as the zenith of creation, and one of the ‘talents’ or precious gifts God has given to all humanity is the freedom to make their own choice, ‘free-will.’ Another of these talents is the capacity to love. As Christians, we hope and pray that people will respond to God’s love in affirmation and acceptance. But people do not have to. We hope folk see in Jesus Christ the image of a loving

God who died for our wrongdoing, and opened the way to reconciliation and forgiveness. But folk remain free to choose otherwise. Just three chapters earlier, Jesus had described heaven as a great banquet, where there is much celebration and rejoicing (Matt 22:2), but he made it clear we can choose not to go. One Apostle wrote of it as choosing our citizenship: *'our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.'* (Phil 3:18, 20).

So where does that leave us? Jesus in Matthew is giving his hearers an image of heaven but also an image of what it means to cast our vote against God, to use the free will God has given us in a negative choice. When people reject God, they are choosing separation from a God who loves them. They are choosing separation from heaven - a place of light, joy, peace, a place where we are made whole again, a place of celebration.



In the future where God has redeemed all, those who choose separation are choosing nothingness, a place outside the Holy

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City, a *Gehenna* outside Jerusalem. But it will be like realising all your friends are at a fantastic party and celebration and you had decided not to go. Any agony, torment and anguish is less something that God is inflicting, and more the consequence of a self-realisation that one's own choices have cost eternal separation from all that is good. It's perhaps unsurprising that *Gehenna* was considered 'cursed' by citizens of Jerusalem.

However, as Christians we remember that Christ *'redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree" (Gal 3:13).* This knowledge encourages us to pray for those around us, that they might turn to Christ, even though their words and actions might indicate their choice is otherwise. After all, the Apostles really had a hard time believing that someone like Saul, who became St Paul, could turn to Christ (Acts 9:26). Also, we must never consider anyone a lost cause, but remain prayerful on their behalf, for God never gives up hope for his people and can even redeem our negative choices for ultimate good. What about people or children who sadly die before they can respond to the good news of God's love? Psalm 103 reminds us that our Lord is gracious and compassionate, full of mercy; all innocents will be welcomed into his heavenly kingdom. As St Paul wrote: *'For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'* (Rom 8:38-39).