

Hell

We know as Christians, that for those who do not enter into Heaven, or the state of purification prior to Heaven, the alternative is not a pleasant one: Hell. Is there really such a thing as Hell? Does anyone go there? Did Our Lord speak of Hell? Will it last forever? What is it like?

Scripture and Tradition

Our Lord refers to Hell and its punishment about 30 times in the gospels. He uses the terms Hades and Gehenna, both translated as Hell, but more often speaks of fire, everlasting fire or unquenchable fire.

If your hand is your difficulty, cut it off! Better for you to enter life maimed than to keep both hands and enter Gehenna with its unquenchable fire. If your foot is your undoing, cut it off! Better for you to enter life crippled than to be thrown into Gehenna with both feet. If your eye is your downfall, tear it out! Better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to be thrown with both eyes into Gehenna, where "the worm dies not and the fire is never extinguished." (Mk 9:43_48)

Of course, Our Lord is not literally suggesting that anyone should cut off his hand or tear out his eye. He uses these comparisons simply to indicate the terrible nature of Hell, and the sin which sends one there. It seems he accomplished his goal very well, for the words are truly frightening.

Does anyone go to Hell? There is, of course no way of knowing who does go to Hell, but Our Blessed Lord did say the following:

Go in through the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the road which leads to ruin, and there are many who go in through it. Narrow is the gate and hard is the way that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Mt 7:13,14)

Jesus also said, "The invited are many, the elect are few" (Mt 22:14) and "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you will seek to enter and will not be able" (Lk 13:24).

Many people wonder if perhaps at some point in time Hell might end and all the souls be released. Origen, a theologian in the early Church, believed that Hell would not last for all eternity, as did some others. However, the Church never approved this idea and in fact, declared that the punishment of Hell would last for all eternity (Fourth Lateran Council). This was no doubt based on the use of the word "eternal" or "everlasting" in Scripture when describing the punishment of Hell. (See Mt 25:41 & 46; 2 Thess 1:9.)

The Doctors and Saints

Many people through the ages have had great difficulty in imagining that there is such a thing as Hell, in light of all the revelations about God's goodness and mercy. The doctrine of Hell is truly a mystery with which we must struggle, even after it has clearly been spelled out to us, and yet the Church doctors were all agreed on their acceptance of this doctrine. St. Augustine wrote the following:

(Hell) is not a matter of feeling but of fact... there is no way of waiving or weakening the words the Lord has told us he will pronounce at the last judgement.

St. Bernard wrote of the importance of thinking or meditating on the horrors of Hell:

Let us descend into Hell while living, so that we will not descend into Hell after we are dead! (St. Bernard of Clairvaux)

St. Teresa of Avila relates the following:

...I was at prayer one day when suddenly, without knowing how, I found myself, as I thought, plunged right into Hell. I realized it was the Lord's will that I should see the place which the devils had prepared for me there and which I had merited for my sins... I felt a fire within my soul the nature of which I am utterly incapable of describing. My bodily sufferings were so intolerable that, though in my life I have endured the severest sufferings of this kind__the worst it is possible to endure, the doctors say, such as the shrinking of the nerves during my paralysis...__ none of them is of the smallest account by comparison with what I felt then, to say nothing of the knowledge that they would be endless and never_ ceasing. And these are nothing by comparison with the agony of my soul, an oppression, a suffocation and an affliction so deeply felt... that I cannot too forcibly describe it.

An argument that is often raised is that there can be no one in Hell because a mother could never be happy in Heaven knowing that her child was in Hell. On this subject St. Catherine of Siena wrote this:

A person in Heaven has his will so united to God's will that a father or mother seeing his son or a son seeing his father or mother in Hell is not troubled.

This fact would be combined with the fact that in Heaven the soul would be so filled with an all_ consuming love for the Lord, that all other loves would hardly be missed.

A theory which arose in the 12th century about the nature of Hell punishment holds for two pains: the pain of loss, of not seeing God; and the pain of sense, believed to be a burning sensation. St. Catherine of Siena commented on these two as follows:

The first pain of Hell is being deprived of the vision of God, which is such pain to souls that they would rather choose the fire and torments and see God than be without them and not see God.

Thus, the pain of not seeing God is viewed as far more agonizing than the pain of sense.

Reflections

The mystery of Hell is involved with the freedom of mankind and the justice of God. Although God is all_merciful, one who enters Hell has rejected God's mercy, and God does not overrule our freedom to force acceptance of that mercy. Perhaps the following analogy can shed some light on this. Let's say you come upon someone working on his car trying to solve a problem which you solved on your own car the previous week. Now, let's say that you offer him some advice, explaining that you know just how to fix the problem. But, although it is obvious that he is going about it the wrong way, let's suppose that he rejects your offer, saying, "Look, I don't need your help. I can fix it myself." And the more you insist on helping him, the more insistent he is in refusing. You can't very well tie him up and fix the car for him. Even if you did, there would be no merit on his part for getting the car fixed. The merit would be all yours. Thus, because he is too proud to accept your help, he is left to his problem which he may *never* solve.

So it is with the Lord. He has the answer to all our problems; he *is* the answer. But, if we reject him, he cannot, without denying our freedom (and thus the merit of our love), force us to accept him. Thus, he must leave us in our self-chosen misery of having rejected God who is infinitely good.