

There is a town in Norway named Hell. Many of you may know that the predominant religious group in Norway is Lutheran. So a couple of Lutherans from the United States visited Hell, Norway, and then sent a postcard to their pastor back home. Dear Pastor," it said, "We passed through Hell today, and we're concerned. Almost everyone there seems to be Lutheran." My apologies to our Lutheran brothers and sisters. I just don't know if an INFERNO, or HELL, Italy, exists, or I could have changed the story to have a swipe at us Catholics. Although you just might say at the end of this homily that it was as close to hell as you ever want to be!

This Sunday's Gospel is one of those rare moments when Jesus mentions hell. The best known biblical image for hell relates to a deep, narrow gorge southeast of Jerusalem called "the Valley of Ben Hinnom," in which it was said that unfaithful Israelites once offered up child sacrifices to the pagan gods Molech and Baal (2 Chron 28:3, 33:6; Jer 7:31, 21; 19:2-6). So this place is forever condemned by Josiah as an eternally unholy place (2 Kings 23:10).

Later the valley was used as a garbage dump by the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Thus, the Valley of Ben Hinnom became known as the dump, a place where discarded trash was tossed, which was forever on fire, and therefore the place of destruction by fire in Jewish tradition. The Greek word 'gehenna,' 'hell,' used in this passage, is commonly used in the New Testament for the place of final punishment, is derived from the Hebrew name for this valley.

Hell is thus a place of rot, of mutilated bodies and revulsion. To this the Old Testament adds the image of burning, of smoke and unquenchable fire. Perhaps the burning became associated with purgation, of sacrificial, purifying fire that burns away the impurities that are an offense to God. Jesus speaks often of the 'fire of hell' (Mt 5:22) and depicts Himself as a rescuer from hell. We ought to note, especially, that Jesus is never depicted as condemning people to hell, but rather as one sent to urge people to avoid hell. His urgings are nowhere more emphatic and dramatic than in this Sunday's gospel. Hell is less the destination for those who reject Jesus than that sad condition from which Jesus seeks to rescue people.

Hell is a dump, an ash heap, a place to discard trash, Gehenna. Jesus is the one who seeks to save the lost, to retrieve those who have been tossed aside, to rescue from the tragedy that is hell, that place that is clearly at odds with the intentions of God. (adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, July-Sept 2021, p. 39)

Second, some theology about hell. Of the nearly 4000 verses in the Gospels, Jesus speaks of hell in Mark only once, in this passage, in Luke 3 times, in Matthew 6 times, and in John, not at all. He speaks of judgment in Mark only once, in Luke twice, in Matthew and John 6 times each. In His lengthiest consideration of judgment (Mt 25 – the parable of the sheep and goats), the crucial question pivots on none of the sins Jesus mentioned elsewhere – fornication, theft, murder, adultery, etc. – but on the sole issue of our sensitivity or indifference to the suffering of the poor, the hungry, the needy, the imprisoned, who Jesus identified as Himself.

If we contrast the relative rareness of Jesus' speaking about hell or judgment with the profusion of times in the Gospels when He both speaks and acts as one come to heal and to forgive, to set free, we come away with a picture of Christianity that is far different from what many Christians have come to expect, arguing to this very day about who is worthy to receive communion. Could we get more clueless about what this is all about?

There is no doubt that we sin. There is no doubt that we too often blithely slither off the hook and become forgetful about our own faults. But there is also no doubt that according to Jesus, being forgiven ought to be a great deal easier than we fear. (GOD: THE OLDEST QUESTION, William J. O'Malley, p. 162-163)

It is fascinating to me that while the Catholic church teaches that there IS a hell, it has never said that anyone is actually there. Although a lot of fellow Catholics seem to almost gleefully tell you that so and so is definitely in hell, or going to hell, and I'm not sure where they could possibly get that certainty. The following piece of my homily is taken from Bishop Robert Barron, based on the work of the great Catholic scholar Hans Urs Von Balthasar, who was generally seen as fairly conservative. So if you have a problem with what I say, write to Barron, but I'd suggest you need to have some pretty fabulous theological chops to take him on. You could also write to Balthasar, but he's dead, so I wouldn't sit around waiting for a response! No Church authority has taken Barron on, in fact it has made him a bishop – an official teacher of the church -- but have at it if you wish! Balthasar did run afoul of the Church's more traditional wing when he claimed that it is legitimate for Christian's to HOPE that Hell is empty. GOT THAT? Legitimate for Christian's to HOPE that Hell is empty.

That proposition has run into resistance for a variety of reasons, including claims that it clashes with official magisterial teaching in the Catholic Church ranging from the Fourth Lateran Council to St. John Paul II. However, most critiques begin with the Bible, and what appear to be some fairly unequivocal statements from Jesus Himself. One oft-cited verse is Matthew 25:46, where Jesus says "And the wicked will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life."

Barron, no raving liberal, says that he is basically in the Balthasar camp. He insists, as Balthasar did, that in light of free will the human person can 'definitely' refuse God, and thus Hell is always a 'real possibility.' Whether anyone has actually exercised that option, however, is another matter.

Barron writes: "I take the Balthasar view, which is not that we know if all people will be saved, or even that we expect all people to be saved. It's merely that it's legitimate to HOPE for universal salvation. Further, it's a REASONABLE hope. It's not just a hope against hope, a wild, unwarranted move. Rather, it's grounded in what Christ accomplished on the Cross and in the resurrection. In that sense, there are reasonable grounds for the hope that all people might be saved. I've gotten in trouble with people for the hope that all people might be saved. I've gotten in trouble with people for that because there are many who do want Hell to be really emphasized, but I don't see that in John Paul II, in Benedict XVI, and certainly not in Pope Francis." (TO LIGHT A FIRE ON THE EARTH, Barron with John L Allen, Jr, p. 176-178)

In other words, read everything in terms of how the story ends. The Bible does not resolve the question of whether Hell is empty, but it at least provides a reasonable basis for HOPING the answer just might be yes. Besides, Barron argues, that this is no way to evangelize – starting with hell. Again, he writes, "For the overwhelming majority of unchurched people today, the very idea of Hell is just an appalling absurdity. Beginning the evangelical process by emphasizing hell and stirring up fear of it just strikes me, therefore, as a complete nonstarter from the practical standpoint. Look through the writings and speeches of John Paul II, one of the greatest Catholic evangelists of modern times, and you will find precious little on Hell. And you won't find one mention of it in EVANGELII GAUDIUM, THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL, Pope Francis' magisterial summation of the synod on evangelization. Mind you this doesn't mean for a moment that we should never talk about Hell. ...I just don't think we should lead with it...." (IBID, p. 176-178) I'm giving you a whole homily full of hell! I'm doing my best to bring hell back into church!

Third, hell is never a nasty surprise for a basically happy person. Hell can only be the full flowering of a pride and selfishness that have, through a long time, twisted a heart so thoroughly that it considers happiness as unhappiness and has an arrogant disdain for happy people. If we are essentially warm of heart this side of eternity, we need not fear that a nasty surprise awaits us on the other side because somewhere along the line, unknowingly, we missed the boat and our life went terribly wrong.

Unfortunately for many of us who came of age in the middle of the 20th century, we were taught something very different. We could live our life sincerely, in essential honesty, relate fairly to others, try our best given our weaknesses, have some bounce and happiness in life, and then die and find that some sin we'd committed or mistake we'd made, perhaps even unknowingly, could doom us to hell, and there was no further chance for repentance. The second before our death was our last chance to change things, no do-overs after death, no matter how badly we might like then to repent. As a tree falls so shall it lie! We were often schooled to fear dying and the afterlife.

But whatever the practical effectiveness of such a concept, because the fear of hell really could make us hesitate in the face of temptation, it is essentially wrong and should not be taught in the name of Christianity. Why? Because it belies the God and the deep truths that Jesus revealed. Jesus did teach that there was a hell and that it was a possibility for everyone. But the hell that Jesus spoke of is not a place or a state where someone is begging for one last chance, just one more minute of life to make an Act of Contrition, and God is refusing. The God whom Jesus both incarnates and reveals is a God who is forever open to repentance, forever open to contrition, and forever waiting for our return from our prodigal wanderings.

With God we never exhaust our chances. That's part of our doctrine on Purgatory. Can we imagine God looking at a repentant person and saying, "Sorry! For you, it's too late! You had your chance! Don't come asking for another chance now!" That could not be the Father of Jesus.

And yet the Gospels at times can give us that impression. That is why we have to keep the ENTIRE STORY – AND THE END OF THE STORY – in mind at all times. For example, the famous parable of the rich man who ignores the poor man at his doorstep, dies, and ends up in hell, while the poor man, Lazarus, whom he had ignored, is now in heaven, comforted in the bosom of Abraham. From his torment in hell, the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to him with some water, but Abraham replies that there is an unbridgeable gap between heaven and hell and no one can cross from one side to the other. That text, along with Jesus' warnings that the doors of the wedding banquet will at a point be irrevocably closed, has led to the common misconception that there is a point of no return, that once in hell, it is too late to repent.

But that's not what this text, nor Jesus' warning on the urgency of repentance, teaches. The 'unbridgeable gap' here refers, among other things, to a gap that remains forever unbridged here in this world between the rich and the poor. And it remains unbridged because of our intransigence, our failure to change heart, our lack of contrition, compassion, and generosity -- not because God runs out of patience and says, "Enough! No more chances!" It remains unbridged because, habitually, we become so set in our ways that we are incapable of change and genuine conversion/repentance.

Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus actually draws upon a more ancient Jewish story that illustrates this intransigence: In the Jewish version of the parable, God does hear the rich man's plea from hell for a second chance and grants it to him. The rich man, now full of new resolutions, returns to life, goes immediately to the market, loads his cart with food, and, as he is driving home, meets Lazarus on the road. Lazarus asks for a loaf of bread. The rich man jumps off his cart to give it to him, but as he pulls a huge loaf of bread from his cart, his old self starts to reassert itself. He begins to think, "This man doesn't need a whole

loaf! Why not just give him a part! And why should he have a fresh loaf? I'll give him some of the stale bread!" Immediately, he finds himself back in hell! He still cannot bridge the gap.

Kathleen Dowling Singh, in her remarkable book, *THE GRACE IN DYING*, submits that in making a series of mental contractions -- we create our own fear of death. We keep shrinking God down to our size, our own little judgments and stinginess toward others in so many ways. It's also true for the afterlife: by making a series of unfortunate theological contractions, we create our own fear of hell. (adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, *WRESTLING WITH GOD*, p. 73-76)

Now as I was researching this homily, I began to think of all the ways we use the word hell, and wondered where the phrase 'hell's bells' came from. So I googled it. It came into use in the beginning of the 20th century -- just as a phrase of surprise. And the only reason for the bells is that it rhymes with hell. You get that free of charge. The gospel is a story of grace; but HELL'S BELLS! -- we keep reducing it to a series of judgments and condemnations, which is more reflective of us than it is of God. May God expand our understanding of Him -- and expand our hearts to be like His. Which would be heaven! Amen.