

Trinity XVIII, 30<sup>th</sup> September 2018

Mk. 9:38-end

*Avoiding Hell.*

A couple of weeks ago, I preached about why Jesus had to suffer. Why it wasn't just something the Romans did, but was something Jesus did in obedience, which God wanted.

I said the Cross was where Jesus dives down into all human misery. Down into the depths of our pit, looking for the lost. And he puts his arms around them and begins the long journey back to the light. I said that meant no-one is ever doomed, no-one is ever alone, that always, even in the most failed and miserable life, always there is hope. Where there is Jesus, there is hope, and Jesus has dived to the depths.

And I told a story, about a colleague of mine who took his own life, just before he was due to be arrested for appalling sexual crimes. I told it to make the point that even for him, for a minister of Jesus, who destroyed his own life, and perhaps the lives of many others ... even for him, there is hope. Because where there is Jesus, there is hope. And Jesus has dived to the depths of the pit.

But that sermon was not enough. That sermon needs this sermon.

Because if all you heard was that sermon, you might think my friend *must* be saved. That *everyone* must be saved, even the most wicked person imaginable. Jesus died to save them, so saved they must be. Love *must* win.

But I didn't say that. Because it is not true.

That's partly because God respects our freedom. If deep, deep down you want nothing to do with God, in the end God will respect that. Very well, he says, with infinite sorrow, *your* will be done. Be on your own. Sometimes, love loses. It does all it can, but it loses – unless people respond. Indeed, love waits: waits for our response, for our repentance. I trust it never stops waiting. But if it always wins, if it *must* win, then it isn't really love. It's a lot more like Force. I *hope* my friend is saved. But I cannot know it.

That's one very good reason for believing in the possibility of Hell: of ultimate and eternal ruin. But there's a simpler and more decisive one.

It is what Jesus taught.

Listen to what he says: If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off: it's better for you to enter life maimed, than to have two hands and go to hell. If your eye causes you to sin, tear it out: it's better for you to be blind than have full sight, and be thrown into hell where the worm never dies and the fire is never quenched.

Stuff like this is all over the Gospels. Ignore it, and you ignore a lot.

Well, maybe this wasn't really Jesus. It was St. Mark or someone else misunderstanding him. Perhaps ... but that would be such an extensive and widespread and fundamentally important misunderstanding, why would you trust anything else those people say?

Or maybe it was Jesus, but he was wrong, and we have a better idea of what God is really like than He did ... well, then he can't really be God incarnate, can he? He must just be another religious teacher, and not a terribly good one at that.

There is no way round it. Jesus thought people might go to hell. And that means we must too. We may not find that pleasant – but pretty much the definition of being a Christian is recognising that Jesus knows better than we do.

So hell is real. How do we avoid it?

Well, Jesus says, there is stuff that blocks your relationship with God, which can block it so much that in the end it kills it. It's just like the arteries in the physical heart: they clog up too much, and you die. The only solution is to find the blockage, and cut it out. To undergo radical, spiritual, heart surgery.

So what's the 'stuff'? If your hand causes you to stumble, if your eye... what's Jesus driving at?

That things which are as basic to us as parts of our body, as taken for granted and essential to our identities – that even these can be the problem. The most obvious candidates are things like our desires for sex, money, and power. None of them, like your right hand, are bad in themselves. But the desire for them does *tend* to go a bit mad, and to lead into all kinds of disasters. And Jesus would say: if that's your temptation, if that's where you start to slide into ruin – through greed, through lust, through ego: cut it out. Kill it, right now. No compromises, no half-measures, no 'I'll just have one more little taste' – no, end it, now.

Money, sex, and power are the obvious candidates. But there are others, less obvious and perhaps even more dangerous.

Take, for instance, our desire to be approved of. Most of us are desperate to be well thought of, desperate to be considered good people. Even that can lead us into danger. Think, for instance, of the great pressure we are currently under to change what the church teaches about same-sex relationships. Our culture has changed its mind about homosexuality and is waiting for the bigoted, homophobic church to catch up – and it is not waiting patiently. It will mock, it will abuse, it may even in the end prosecute those who do not agree. The temptation to avoid all that, to tell the world what it wants to hear, is immense.

Now, please listen: *maybe* the world is right. *Maybe* our teaching *does* need to change. I am in the 'don't know' category on that. And we are all going to have to think about it a lot more. But I *can* tell you what would be disaster. Disaster would be changing the teaching simply because the world wants us to, to win acceptance or popularity. Because that would be saying that *really*, fundamentally, we're not that interested in God. What we *really* want is to fit in. Today's Gospel speaks right to that. Does your desire for acceptance cause you to stumble? Cut it out. It is better for you to be loathed, than to turn your back on God.

Then there's that other – closely related – attitude which lies just under the surface of our churches. It often happens when, for instance, a preacher is talking about hell. Quite a few will be sitting there thinking, 'Well, I don't agree with that bit. I don't accept that.' Which would be fine – really, really fine - if it was just a matter of me telling you what I think about

things. Or even if all the bishops in the world were telling you what they think. If that was the case, disagree away!

But when it's Jesus.... When it is *Jesus* saying: you know, hell is real. Or, you know, you really should fast. Or, you really must become radically financially generous ... well, he wasn't suggesting propositions for debate. These are *commands*. Jesus is not inviting you to discuss, he is summoning you to obey. And we really, really do not like that. Most of us resent the idea that *anyone* would dare command *us*. We alone are masters of our destiny, no-one tells *us* what do. It's a very basic, very powerful, instinct ... and spiritually very dangerous. Master of your own soul, indeed? You know better than the one who made it? You really know what is best for you, you are really the fount of wisdom? Jesus might say, if your pride, your dignity causes you to stumble... cut it out. It is better for you to learn a little humility, than to shut your ears to God.

And humility leads to the final point. It's very easy to hear a Gospel passage like today as basically saying 'try harder!' Look at all the thing you need to cut out: lust, greed, ego, desire for acceptance, pride.... So many things to change! And indeed, there is a certain amount of truth in that. Being a Christian involves moral struggle. True.

But here is the bigger truth. You can't fix yourself. No matter how hard you try, your problems – my problems – are just too deep seated for that. They are like my right hand, my foot, my eye: they are that much part of me. I don't even *know* half the stuff that is wrong with me, let alone have the ability to cure it. Left to myself, I am lost.

But I am not left to myself.

There is someone bigger than me, wiser than me, stronger than me.

Someone who has dived down to the depths of my failure, who has put his arms around me, who wants, desperately, to heal me and save me.

Someone who just waits for me to say – whether now, or after my death - 'yes Lord, please do. Do whatever you need to do, Great Surgeon of my soul. I place myself in your hands. Heal me. Remake me. Bring me home.'

There is Someone. There is Jesus, crucified and risen for me.

And where there is Jesus, there is hope. To him be the glory, forever and ever.

**Peter Waddell**