

St Thomas of the Air Church  
 Advent IV  
 December 20, 2020  
 rmceely+

So shall it be at the end of the world  
 The angels shall come forth and sever the wicked from amongst the just  
 And shall cast them into the furnace of fire  
 And there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Matt 13:49

One of the ancient Anglican Advent traditions during the four Sundays in Advent is for the clergy to offer sermons on the Four Final Things of Life;

Death  
 Judgment  
 Heaven, and  
 Hell

Four Sundays. Four Final Things. One for each Sunday.

That would make this fourth Sunday in Advent a time to talk about Hell.

Please know this discussion of Hell is not a pleasant topic

But one that I think clergy have a duty to discuss

and something we all must know

if we are to avoid its consequences

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At first it seems incongruous to be speaking about Hell

Only 4 days before we burst into the Joy of Christmas

But on second thought

The Joy is for the incarnation

God becoming Man to save us from ourselves.

So a discussion of what He is saving us from

All of a sudden gives sense and power to the Joy

It seems that a little girl was standing outside the Sunday School holding a book entitled “Jonah and the Whale”.

The pastor happened by and thinking himself good with children, he decided to have some fun with the little girl.

He asked her “do you believe that Jonah was swallowed up by a whale. Spent three days inside and then was spit out and was still alive?”

Of Course I do. The story is in the Bible and we are talking about it in Sunday School. She said.

The pastor pushed her a bit and asked “Can you prove to me that the story is true?”

She frowned and fidgeted a bit “I’ll ask Jonah when I get to Heaven”

The pastor retorted “What if Jonah is not in Heaven?”

The girl thought for a moment, put her hands on her little hips, looked the Pastor right in the eye and with a stern expression on her face said:

”Well, then you can ask him yourself”.

Dealing with the last four final things of life

is not something the modern church does any more.  
The experts have advised that the topic is too off putting  
And that we should by all means avoid talking about Hell.  
Because it is unpleasant and drives people away.

Isn’t it astonishing

that all of the ancient peoples of almost every culture  
reflected in so many ways on the hereafter

While modern man seems scarcely interested in it.

Has the seduction and sheer weight of secularization

engendered a kind of forgetfulness,  
an amnesia  
or as CS Lewis put it, “an evil enchantment”  
that moves us away from the Last Four Things,  
death, judgment, heaven and hell?

Has the secularization of our lives made the divine fullness of our lives  
 recede to the point where mankind is now truly alone?  
 Actually forgotten or  
 can't recall the purpose of our lives in this world  
 and the consequences hereafter?

Do we live in a world where the last four things  
 have been reduced to a rumor,  
 a kind of conspiratorial whisper  
 surrounded by the all encompassing secular world?

Is mankind now gasping for breath?

Has there been a spiritual asphyxiation?

Has mankind devolved so as to believe there is nothing after death  
 that we need worry about,  
 neither Heaven nor Hell?

Are there only the things of this world?

Is there no God,  
 no angels,  
 no devil,  
 no prayer  
 nor grace  
 nor holiness in this world?

Perhaps the cleverest ruse of the Devil  
 is to try to persuade mankind  
 that neither he nor Hell actually exist

Truth be told

We have little direct evidence about Hell

We know of only one man who has been there

And back: Jesus.

Jesus talked about Hell:: A lot.

Even more than he talked about Heaven

So we go to the scriptures for the basis of what we know of Hell  
In the King James Version

There are 23 occasions when Hell is mentioned.

As you know the Old Testament was written in Hebrew  
and the New Testament was written in Greek.

The origins of the words meaning Hell in English are instructive:

The Hebrew word Gehena is a conjunction of Gehee, meaning valley  
And Hinnom meaning sorrow.

Valley of Sorrows describes a valley outside of Jerusalem

Where legend says thousands of Hebrew bodies were taken to be  
burned, where the refuse of the society was dumped.

It is a place of decay and rot

Of the foul odor of death

It is a place of Sorrow

The worst place a Jew could imagine.

The Greek term is Hades; again a conjunction of two words

Ha meaning not

And Eido meaning to see or perceive with the senses.

So we begin to get a picture of Hell even from the origins from which we  
get the word.

Perhaps there are two things that Heaven and Hell share:

Jesus speaks of Hell as He did of Heaven as an actual place.

It is beyond our reasoning to know the

How and the where.

He also speaks of both Heaven and Hell as eternal

In the case of Heaven, eternity is a most pleasant

and wonderful concept

in the case of Hell, eternity contributes to the torment

But there the similarities end.

From Scripture we know Hell is a place that is everything Heaven is not  
And has everything that Heaven lacks.

Where Heaven is inhabited by the communion of Saints  
Hell is isolation in the extreme

Where Heaven is light  
Hell is darkness  
    But an overwhelming and sinister darkness  
    That is palpable, oppressive, consuming

Where Heaven is abundant life  
Hell is nothing

Where Heaven is joy and laughter  
Hell is nothing

Where Heaven is life with God  
Hell is nothing

You are beginning to see the picture.

Where Heaven is hope  
Hell is despair and nothing

Where Heaven is abundant love almost as we know the air here  
Hell is nothing

In Hell there is no hope  
    Only despair

In hell there is pain  
    But not only excruciating physical and bodily pain  
    But emotional  
    Spiritual  
    Pain of the worst kind; of heart, soul and mind

But pain that is beyond human endurance  
And pain without respite,  
    Without relief  
    Without the balm of unconsciousness to provide respite  
    Without the escape of death to end it

Archbishop Morse told seminary students his analysis of Hell  
    It was a chilling and terrifying lecture as only he could tell it  
    He told of nothingness

He told of a soul in Hell suspended in the darkness  
    Without sight but there was nothing to see even if there were sight  
    Without sound but there was nothing to be heard  
    Without taste, but there was nothing to be tasted  
    Without touch, but there was nothing to touch  
    Without smell but there was nothing to be smelt.

A tormented soul suspended in the black void of nothingness  
Without any outside stimulus  
    A soul with only his thoughts to occupy him  
    With only the memory of his sins playing and  
    replaying in what was left of his mind  
    aching boredom his tormentor  
        his sins haunting

without the hope of Christ  
without the forgiveness of God

without the slightest chance of redemption  
    without change

Forever

Maybe there is one other thing that Heaven and Hell share  
Choice  
Our choice.

Because you see,  
The choice between heaven and hell  
Is ours.  
We chose by our life in this world  
Whether we spend eternity in Heaven  
Or whether we spend eternity in Hell

And we of St Thomas Church have an advantage  
A saviour  
Jesus, the Christ  
Who by his sacrifice has already paid our way to Heaven

Join in Jesus  
Be one with Him  
Be one of His  
In fact, come back this very week  
And be re-introduced to Him  
At the celebration of His birth

Let the Joy of the season  
Wash over you  
Let the music  
The Spirit of Christmas  
The all too short-lived Good Will;  
Let St Luke's account of the Birth of Our Lord  
The Star  
The Angels  
The Shepherds  
The Miracle  
The Love of God

Enliven, inspire, invigorate and raise your heart and soul.

Immerse yourself in the mass we call Christ's mass.  
Christmas

And heaven  
    can be yours.  
    Forever.