

Judgement and Purgatory

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A Talk to the Priests of the Diocese of Westminster following The Mass for Deceased Clergy in the Cathedral on 11th November 2010.

That this talk on judgement and purgatory takes place on the eve of my birthday, and that I am rapidly heading for the mid-60s when things begin to go wrong with the body, is something that has been bothering me. What's the effect on me? Very simply, I come to believe more and more in the immortality of the soul and to think and hope that there's more to me than meets the eye and that this core of selfhood, whatever it is, it will not be extinguished by death.¹ Isn't it strange that philosophy suddenly becomes interesting as one's knees begin to creak? Self-interest, I suspect, is a great impulse to reflection.

These intimations are reminders not only of mortality, but because of the theme of this talk, a reminder also of the ultimate seriousness of life, and of course, being Scottish, I like heavy and serious things and I don't care who knows it. You will know the story told by Lord Mackay of Clashfern of the devout Scottish Presbyterian who stood trial for a particular offence. The case against him was brought with some vigour and then the judge said, 'Would the defence like to bring forward its witnesses.' The accused stood up and said, 'I need no witnesses because God alone is my witness that I am innocent.' The judge looked at him and said, 'That may be so, but my advice to you is to call someone better known locally'.

Of course, we have a problem now in that it is more difficult to presume a minimal, 'local' knowledge of God in our culture than there was in Presbyterian Scotland. The rituals which shape the year are eating and shopping binges at the end of December, something to do with rabbits and chocolates in the Spring, and most recently, a celebration of horror and pseudo-violence on the last day in October. If you were in central London on Halloween, you would have seen people with whitened faces like ghouls, red gashes on their throats, hints of fangs round the mouth, fishnet tights and cloaks, a world of vampires and characters from the Rocky Horror Show.

The real tradition of All Hallows' Eve is that before the day of holiness, there is a crack in the fabric of the cosmos which allows evil spirits from the underworld to assault us: at that point in time, we are vulnerable, as traditionally we are vulnerable at the moment of death and need the name of Jesus to be spoken to us loudly because hearing is the last faculty to go and the devil needs to be outshouted in the name and power of Jesus. And so, on All Hallows' Eve, people are meant to go out into the streets in scary costumes and make loud noises to frighten the devils away and to enact annually the victory of holiness over evil. It is a mythological extension of the themes of the Easter vigil, but who tells you that now? No one. We are to outshout the devils and cast them back down to their captivity in hell, and that's what All Hallows and its eve are about. It is both

¹ 'The immortality of the soul is something of such vital importance to us affecting us so deeply, that one must have lost all feeling not to care about knowing the facts of the matter... Thus our chief interest and chief duty is to seek enlightenment on this subject, on which all our conduct depends.' (B.Pascal, *Pensées* L427 (*Penguin*, 1995), 128) Those interested in the shaping of the Christian narrative of a post-death judgement of the soul should read the myth at the end of Plato's *Gorgias*; Socrates presents it as a 'myth' but says that he regards it as 'truthful' (*logos*).

Christian and mythological, and I want you at this point to see that there is such a thing as Christian mythological thinking which is significant and truth-bearing.

But the underpinning of this religious vision has gone now: how Halloween is now celebrated comes from Hollywood imagines the forces of evil, and the young people on the streets and clubs were having fun imitating the images from horror films they had seen. They evoked demonic presences that no one takes seriously in any ontological sense, but have an imaginative power that derives from the world of digital reality, and in popular imagination death-dealing demons, robotic killing-machines and seductive vampires have taken the place of metaphysical evil. (In the Christian vision metaphysical evil is only what comes from the twisting of human and angelic freedoms. Creatures go wrong through the exercise of their freedom; evil is a twisting of the will, a by-product of freedom, not a feature within the natural order. This is why one can say in all seriousness that death is not evil because it is a feature of the world's order that expresses the divine nature.²

Why mention this? It could be argued that these days only in the world of fantasy do people have the sense of struggling against evil, only here do they take seriously the possibility of the innocent being vindicated, the demand for retributive justice being met, wrongs being righted and the possibility of an ultimate victory over evil and extinction. Themes that used to be part of a Christian world-view, and still are, surface now in a debased form without any real significance for the lives of those who imaginatively enter this world of fantasy. No behaviour is significantly altered: that's what characterises pseudo- or false religion. You do not have to live differently, ethically, to enter this world and enjoy the *frisson* it offers.

People's imaginative and spiritual lives still deal with vulnerability, forces that might destroy us, the imagining of a horizon of justice in which wrongs are righted and evil dealt with, but in many cases they continue outside the Church in deformed ways. There is a mutation of genuine Christianity in some, perhaps many, aspects of popular, post-Christian culture. What is the cult of celebrity if not a re-working of the cult of the saints that lies at the heart of the doctrine of the Church and Purgatory in which we never get to heaven alone?

Can I suggest that many young people might be more familiar and comfortable with the idea of the undead than with the topic of resurrection? On that Saturday night in London, there was no victory over evil, nobody was killed, nobody was really frightened by it all except a Jesuit who was scared by the lack of serious religious vision behind the whole thing and wondered whether there can be again a horizon of ultimate seriousness underpinning human life. Will a real metaphysical seriousness be possible to us again? – now that may be a typically Scottish question, but it's also a deeply Christian question as we watch cultural mutations that mimic religion and, in a sense, make proper religion unnecessary for many people in this country.

²The point of destructiveness within creation is not in the fact of death, but in the moral evil associated with human freedom: this is the point where the creation can be mortally self-destructive... There is a 'death' associated with sin which is a graver matter than physical dying. (J. McDade, 'The Death of Christ, his Descent among the Dead and his Resurrection,' in *Commentary on the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ed. M. J. Walsh (Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 143-61; 150-1)

I remember a conversation with one of our lecturers at Heythrop who said to me, 'What does it matter? In the end, you die alone'. I said, 'No, wherever you are and whatever the circumstances of your death, you always die in the Church. There is no such thing as an isolated death any more than there is such a thing as an isolated person if it is true that through the Incarnation, the Son of God has united himself with everyone. We *all* die in Christ.' Now I think I was being very Catholic in this conversation and he was being unnecessarily isolationist in his view of human beings, a difference both of temperament and theology.

Now if I'm right, all human death is touched by Christ's presence, and if Christ offered himself 'for all' and not 'for many' – as we will soon have to say in the Eucharistic Prayer, although we will have to teach our people that in this Prayer 'many' does not mean 'many', but means 'all', and they will rightly wonder if we mean 'all', why don't we just say 'all'? Liturgy seems to be exempt from the principle that words should mean what they are generally taken to mean. But let us move back from liturgy into calmer waters: if Christ offered himself 'for all', then we are right to think that this is efficacious in ways that go beyond what we can calculate. Only God resolves the enigmas of sin and death and he does this through Christ: redeemed and sanctified life in the Church is a sign of what touches all. If the power of Christ is without limit – and it would be a bold person who tries to place restrictions on it – then all human death is a death *in Christ* because he has died *with all* and *for all*. Cyril of Alexandria in the early Church held that the Incarnation is how God comes to dwell in all human beings:

... the Word has dwelt through one man in all of us, so that this one man having been established as the Son of God.... this dignity might pass into all the human race.... The Word dwells in us all.

What I think a doctrine of purgatory gives us is an imaginative way of looking *from our side* at this incorporation of all in Christ; it offers an imaginative, mythical way of thinking of the final stages of being 'in Christ'. What do I mean? Reflect that we experience ourselves as complex and divided, unable to focus consistently on God; charity does not flow effortlessly through us and we cannot make it cohere. We're aware that much of the time we are engaged in a self-directed, subtly self-serving way of life; as Iris Murdoch puts it, we find it hard to be 'good for nothing' and to do good unselfconsciously with no regard for ourselves and our achievement. But genuine selfhood, 'me at my best', will be one in which we are caught up in the good, the true, the beautiful without remainder, without any preening that we are doing this, that we are being a 'better' person. The business of being a real person is a move from self-absorption to selfless attentiveness to God and others.

This will be familiar to you because this is what Christian life is trying to achieve: a proper and foundational respect for God and a generous self-giving to others. The genuine self is a self-emptied self – and if you suspect a paradox there, you are right, but it's no accident that the Epistle to the Philippians speaks of Christ in precisely these terms when it views him as 'self-emptying' or 'kenotic'. The best of us is reached when the worst of us is stripped away from us and when we are taken into goodness in a chastened, less bullish way.

This is something that happens in varying degrees to most people, possibly to everyone, when the obligations of life and its diminutions impose constraints on us and squeeze us, and if this happens, then what comes from us is a purified, more realistic and humble,

genuine selfhood, with a lot of the nonsense drained from us. (Most of what passes for culture and entertainment is simply an indulgence of the nonsense-side of us: you should enjoy it, but you should realise what it is.) Now it's no accident that when the Catholic imagination tells the story of how we journey finally into the depths of God, it thinks of the final stages of this journey as a purification by which all that is contingent and selfish is drawn from us and what remains of us is *the self simply loving God and thereby loving all who are in God*. Our imaginative, mythical story of Purgatory is a canonical, endlessly rich way of glimpsing a truth at the heart of how we are purified so that we become persons in God. As Philip Larkin puts it in 'An Arundel Tomb: 'What will survive of us is love'.

When God's relation to me is brought to completion, then I love God and that is heaven; in the journey towards that point, false ways of being me are stripped from me, and that is purgatory. This will take place in conformity with the truth about myself, and that is judgement. The only tribunal we face is God and before God, self-delusion is not possible because God is the completely real (what Aquinas means by *ipsum esse*). That others are with me on this movement into God is clear; no one is saved alone. That others contribute towards my ultimate wellbeing is also clear because there is a mutual gifting of holiness shared among all who are in Christ, circulated by prayers and good works; *what each of us does contributes to the final good of all*. Is this not the key insight behind the doctrine of purgatory?

This is why we pray, offer Mass for the dead: in order to do what we can do for them through prayer, sacrament and acts of penance. The objection at the time of the Reformation that Catholics by their practices were engaged in a process of self-salvation, trying to save themselves by their religious works, trying to bring about the entry of souls into heaven as a consequence of what human beings did on earth, having multiple Masses said, thereby rendering the grace of Christ unnecessary – all this is a misunderstanding and a distortion, as we said then and say now. Everything that we do is brought about by the grace of Christ. There is a circulation of grace that issues in prayers and sacrifices. What we direct towards the dead is what is prompted and sustained in us by the redeeming grace of Christ: it does not replace Christ's grace, but channels it through the 'thinking members' of the Church.³

If you have been to a funeral in a Church which resolutely refuses to pray for the dead person, you will have felt that something absolutely fundamental is missing. It is as though the desire to do something for the person, commending them to God's mercy and acting in a way that helps them, is blocked: the grace of Christ stops with me and I cannot act as a channel of that grace for the good of those who have died. All the more galling in that one is apparently permitted in those churches to pray for the living, but not for the dead. There is something that feels deeply wrong here: what comes into me from Christ may be directed by me towards others, all others, whether living or dead. And indeed it *needs* to be directed by me towards others because grace impels us outwards.

We do not live for ourselves: that is hell. The doctrine of hell is not a doctrine of divine punishment. It is not in fact a doctrine about God at all, but a recognition of the extreme possibility available to us: there can be self-ruination. (I think, by the way, that we should avoid language of damnation, even self-damnation; possibly what we need to say

³ 'Imagine a body of thinking members... To be a member is to have no life, no being and no movement except through the spirit of the body and for the body.' (Pascal, *Op.cit.*, L.370-1), 108)

is best expressed by speaking of ‘self-ruination’ or ‘complete self-enclosure’). The doctrine of hell is a way of saying that it is within our power so to enclose ourselves, so to make ourselves a ‘black hole’ into which no light can penetrate, that not even God can come into us. Augustine has a phrase about someone being *involutus in se*, ‘enfolding inwards into himself’. A possibility? Yes, in principle. In reality? We do not know. There can be an extreme point of selfishness and destructiveness that is within our grasp; the scope of freedom has no bounds, it is open to unlimited good or unlimited wrong, but we never know enough to be able to assign culpability. ‘Do not judge,’ said the Lord (Mt 7.1).

Let me come back to the question of the relation of living and dead: is it clear that there is a sharp boundary between them? Our Christian tradition that makes it difficult to distinguish between those who are alive and those who are dead. You will recall last Sunday’s Gospel in which Christ says, ‘But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him’ (Lk 20.37-8).

Our Lord is quite clear that the condition of those who have died should properly be described as a condition of ‘living’. If it is the case that ‘all live to God’ (all are alive to him, in him all are living), then, within the limits of what can be said about this mystery, we can say that when we die we go into God and that this entry into God is a ‘being alive’. Too much of our thinking and preaching treats death as an entry into non-being, a cessation of identity. But if you have been at the death of a holy person and shared how they commit themselves to the mercy and goodness of God, it becomes impossible to return to sub-Christian accounts of death as a separation from goodness and life. If I believe Christ, I will ‘live’ in God when I die.

You know the expression from Star Trek that ‘we are in deep space’; surely we can say analogously that we are in ‘deep God’: this is what a doctrine of the Trinity is meant to support. The key idea in Christianity is *participation in the life of God* – this is why Christians cannot but judge that Islam marks no advance on Jewish or Christian teaching because it seems to take us back to the worship of a God whose being is not known to us and is beyond our participation, but presents only a God whose will expressed in the Qur’an demands obedience from us. But Christian Trinitarian faith is that when we deal with Christ in sign (sacrament), faith and memory, we deal with the very *self-gift* of God, and the movement of coming to be ‘in Christ’ is sustained by the divine love at the heart of God, that we call God’s Spirit. The Catholic tradition about Purgatory is how we imagine the final stages of coming to be in Christ, the purification, the purgation, the completed self-emptying that allows there to remain in us only attentive love. *The condition of attentive love is heaven; we have access to this condition through Purgatory.*

Some months ago, the relics of Thérèse of Lisieux came to Westminster Cathedral. You will know that she is a doctor of the Church, a young woman from Normandy, full, as they say in France, of ‘la sagesse normande,’ full of Norman wisdom. Her name as you know was Thérèse Martin, and in some parishes in London this Doctor of the Church is known as ‘Doc Martin’. There is an account of the events around her death bed: when she was dying, the Carmelite nuns were clucking round her saying, ‘Oh, Thérèse is going to heaven, but for the rest of us, all that we can expect is a long purgatory.’ Thérèse lifted her head from the pillow and said, ‘There is no purgatory for those who love’, and

then lay down again and carried on the difficult business of handing herself over to the God whose existence was so problematic for her. This young woman lived out in the convent at Lisieux the spiritual trial of our age, that gnawing sense of the unreality and impossibility of God.

She is perhaps the first Doctor of the Church for whom atheism was part of her spiritual reality. A profound spiritual teaching about Purgatory being given by a young woman dying far too young is a dramatic moment, because this young woman has to hand herself over to a God who is barely glimpsed on the felt horizon of her life. She experienced in the Convent a purgation, a stripping away of pleasant consolations as God became withdrawn from her as a felt presence. 'There is no purgatory for those who love' is a very striking statement, but its truth from another point of view is something we know already because Purgatory is how we come to be able to love attentively and unselfishly. A self-directed form of identity will be taken from us and all that will be left of us, and all that really matters, is an attentiveness towards God.

Purgatory describes the general process of how we are brought to love; it will therefore begin now in this vale of tears, in a convent in Normandy, in a presbytery in Westminster and it will continue until we are able to love. Although we may imagine Purgatory lasting for a time, and then souls leave it, this is simply a way of saying that it ends in heaven, in union with God. When we say that it may take us some time to get from purgatory to heaven, and that through the prayers of others our journey there may be 'shortened', we speak as though there is duration and the flow of time in that world. But there is no time outside time, no time that comes 'after' time. Our language in this regard this is always 'tensed' because we cannot but interpret our lives narratively, by dealing with 'first', and 'then' and 'finally'. In our narrative about a post-death set of events that purify us, we are offering ourselves an imaginative way of describing the full impact of God on a person. In the divine presence, we know ourselves, perhaps for the first time and that may reasonably be described as 'causing us pain' simply because we experience self-knowledge now as both hard, necessary and yet liberating. *I no longer have to pretend*: that final experience may be the purgation imagined in our stories of the pains of purgatory.

Should we pray for the dead? Yes. Is it right to think that we can help the dead by prayers and sacrifices? Yes, because goodness is shared and is efficacious. Is it right to think that those in heaven help people like us to get there too? Yes. Behind all these practices and beliefs is the idea that there is an abundant circulation of Christ's grace channelled through free creatures. Our death is how we enter more deeply into the love we're already in touch with. God's loving me is God making me be; when I die, that loving does not cease but can only be an intensification of God's creative action, and when God's making me be reaches its pitch, we have what the Bible calls 'resurrection'. Certainly, as David Jenkins, the former Bishop of Durham said, it is certainly not 'a conjuring trick with bones' and should not be viewed in this way. Resurrection is what we will be when the full self-gift of God strips away from us all self-directed living, and all that remains is a bond of responsive identity shaped by divine love. We're now at the limits of what we can say and you may well judge that we are already saying more than we can, but it's no bad thing to get to that point and have a look around because there's nothing more important than getting this right.

Pope John Paul II used a three fold division when he wanted to describe the unfolding of God's action among us: he spoke first of the *mystery of unity*: humans are united

through the creative action of God who makes them be. And then this presence deepens as God intensifies his presence among us through the direct presence of Word and Spirit, and this is the *mystery of redemption*. This is where we are as we move towards the *mystery of completion*, when God will be all in all. The final stage in the process of human beings entering the mystery of completion is what we imaginatively call Purgatory. The doctrine encapsulated in this imaginative way is that ultimately we are not defined by the wrong that we do, by the frailty of purpose endemic in us, by the betrayals and lapses that we inflict on ourselves and others. Instead we're defined by the effect of God on us; we are defined by mercy and grace, and it is consoling to know at a funeral or a Mass for the dead that the last word on their identity will be written not by what they have done, but by Christ's merciful death for all.

And with these remarks, I think, we're back where we started, perhaps back in Presbyterian Scotland, a country where you will find embroidered mottoes on the walls above the fireplace, saying, 'The Sabbath is never more than six days away' and 'Prayer is cheaper than the telephone'. It is a country where people say, 'Midsummer Day is the beginning of winter'; 'A glower says more than a smile'; 'Swim in sin and drown in sorrow'. But these should not be the last, gloomy things that remain in our mind on this day, when we have prayed for the priests of this Diocese, priests of the order of Melchizedek, who have gone before us, 'marked with the sign of faith'. We humbly ask God to raise them into union with him, as he has already acted towards Christ and the Blessed Virgin and as one day he will act towards us. May God take them through Purgatory into heaven. Amen.