

AFTER WE DIE (Lindfield 4th August 2019)

PSALM 30: 1-12, LUKE 15: 11-32

This is the most difficult subject I have tackled in a long time. Every time you think you have a good grasp on it you find more scriptures that seem to say something else. So this is very much a “work in progress”. I will share where I am at this moment but that is by no means definitive. If I preach on this topic in 12 months’ time, it may be a very different sermon. With that proviso, let us begin.

Old Testament background: Everyone assumed the Earth was flat. It seemed so. The sun rose and set in different parts of the sky so it seemed logical to assume the sun moved around the earth. From the Creation stories in Genesis 1 & 2 we get the notion that above the earth was the sky and in the sky were the stars, clouds, sun and moon. Keeping them in place was the “Firmament” a type of semi-circular globe that encased the earth. Holding the earth up were 4 pillars. Below the earth was the sea and under the sea was Sheol or Gehenna or Hades – the place where all the spirits of the dead go. Above the firmament was where God lived with the angels, archangels, cherubim and seraphim. Occasionally God or one of His angels came through the firmament to speak to someone on earth.

There was a general belief that a day would come when there would be a resurrection of those in Sheol and they would then go to be with God.

In Jesus’ time the Sadducees, those who guarded the scriptures, denied any sort of resurrection so there is no recorded conversation of Jesus ever speaking to them about it. When Jesus speaks of heaven and hell he only speaks in terms of what was already believed. He doesn’t add much, if any new information.

The metaphors of heaven and hell are numerous. Some theologians take the view that both are realities that we cannot relate to so vivid metaphors are used in an attempt to drive home those realities. For instance Hell is deemed to be the place for unbelievers, those who have rejected God’s free offer of salvation in the Gospel so it is a place of eternal punishment – fire, brimstone, constant crying, pain and despair. Heaven is the reward for faith so it is place of beauty: gates of pearl, street of gold, God on a throne with Jesus next to Him. I do not believe in either of those things. It seems impossible to me that either Heaven or Hell can be a “Place” at all. God is a spirit. He needs no postcode or GPS finder. Satan, likewise is a Spirit, neither does he need an address.

Billy Graham said, “The fire is symbolic. When Jesus talks about hell-fire he does not talk about real flames but a burning thirst for God that is never quenched.” Jesus’ story of the Rich Man and Lazarus appears to point to something like that.

Pope John Paul II said, “Heaven is not a physical place but what follows from communion with God. Hell is not a physical place but rather the state of those who separate themselves from God.”

When Jesus spoke about Heaven or Hell it is mostly in the context of good works being rewarded not about faith. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, the Father should have rejected the son when he came home but he was welcomed with open arms while the faithful older brother (the Pharisees and the orthodox believer) complained that grace was

shown to the profligate son. God seems to welcome all who come to him. In Matthew 25 the separation of the sheep from the goats is in the context of those who did or did not care for the "least of these my children".

By the time of St Paul the Greeks scoffed at the idea of life beyond the grave so he goes to great pains to point out its reality by a presentation of a logical argument (1 Cor. 15). Paul exaggerates the argument to make his point. A common method of arguing in philosophy.

Look at the context of the New Testament writers who write a lot about Heaven and Hell. John, in Revelation, where the most vivid word pictures are, is writing to those being persecuted and executed by the Emperor. His grand pictures of Heaven are to be an encouragement not to give up their faith but they will receive a mighty reward for remaining faithful.

So where does that leave us? I don't believe that Heaven and Hell are places but are metaphors for how God regards us. Eternal Life means we live on firstly, in the fond memories and in the hearts of those who love us and whose lives we have touched with love, kindness and compassion. Since God IS love, eternal life means we somehow add to the understanding and meaning of love itself, hence what God is. 1 John 4: 16 "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God lives in them."

On the other hand, Hell is that metaphor we give to those who are remembered for the evil, horror and suffering they have caused. Whether on a grand scale like Hitler, Josef Stalin, Edi Amin, Pol Pot etc and also the man who beats his wife and kids, those who use religion as an excuse for war, cruelty, racism, hatred and so on.

That still leaves a lot of ordinary people. What about them? I can cite verses that offer various, even conflicting suggestions. St. Peter seem to suggest that they are covered by the benefits of Jesus' death. Jesus suggests they are accepted by God whereas Paul seems to suggest both in different letters he writes. On this I am prepared to remain agnostic. We don't need to know all the answers to every question. We read the Scriptures to see what we think they mean. That in itself is a worthwhile exercise. What I do know and firmly believe is that God loves me and I try my hardest to reflect that love in my life. I often fail but life is in the living. "Whoever does it to the least of these of mine does it to me".

AMEN
