

I found my Christian faith in my early twenties, while I was living and studying in Cambridge. I had sung in church and chapel choirs since my teens, and eventually the poetry and the music and the stories and the sermons got to me, to the point where I needed to ask bigger questions. And someone who was key in helping me ask those questions was my College Chaplain, a wonderful opera singer turned priest. 'I may be a priest', he would say with a twinkle in his eye, 'but I'm not a prude'. He was an easy person to talk to. If you asked him what Christian faith was really about, he would use another catchphrase of his: 'In the end, it's all about love'.

Imagine my surprise, then, when this old romantic suggested that I come and preach to his new congregation about *hell*, only three days before Christmas. What had happened, I wondered, to the prophet of love I had known in my student days? If it really is all about love, what do we need a doctrine of hell for? This was the kind of question I had wrestled with when finding my faith, and I still wrestle with it today.

Advent is the time for asking the hard questions. We are considering what it will mean for God to arrive in the world, and this should be a pretty terrifying thought. In the Old Testament it was always said that no-one can see God face to face and live. In the face of God, all of our self-deceiving is laid bare. There is nowhere to hide. Without this sense of seriousness, we are left with an Advent that is all carrot for Rudolph, and no stick. We need to remember that our lives are finite; that right and wrong matter; that the truth will out.

So let's be brave, and consider hell. The bible refers to a place called *Gehenna*, a valley outside Jerusalem where innocent children had been sacrificed to idols in the time of the prophets. In Jesus' time, the valley was a rubbish dump. But in the prophetic imagination it came to stand for the way God would not let sin go unnoticed. This valley, where the innocent were once killed and burned, became a euphemism for God's condemnation and retribution. Where once the innocent were burnt, so would the guilty be in the end. And as the centuries went on, we embellished this idea in our collective imagination, concocting medieval scenes which say rather more about the darkest depths of our subconscious than about the love of God.

You can tell I'm more than a little doubtful about our more gothic traditions of hell - chestnuts roasting on an open fire and all that. As I said, I have been tempted to forget the whole thing, to think that a religion of love has no need of hell. But we should not ignore the way that the Bible

describes God as both lifting up the lowly and bringing down the mighty. The Magnificat, Mary's song in our gospel today, is a case in point. God's arrival is good news for the lowly, the hungry, and the meek. But for the proud, the powerful and the rich it is, and should be, troubling. If the meek are to be raised up, then the proud are to be cast down. So what is going on here? Does our loving God in fact deal in punishment after all?

There are perhaps a few things we can say. The first is that it is a refrain of the psalms and of scripture that the proud and the sinful often simply suffer the consequences of their own actions. They are hoist by their own petards, as the saying goes - scuppered by their own schemes. 'They dug a pit in my path', says Psalm 57, 'but they have fallen into it themselves'. In such cases, God does not need to punish us, because we bring disaster on ourselves.

We can also say that when God's judgement does arrive it isn't exactly as the prophets expected. Jesus is sent to judge us, but the throne from which he judges is the cross, and because all of us put him there, and all of us deserted him, we all fall short of the glory of God, and we are all condemned. But the judgement turns out to be a rescue mission. 'God sent not his Son into the world *to condemn* the world' says John's gospel, 'but that the world *through him might be saved*'. If we are all one in guilt, we can be all one in being forgiven, and we can be all one in Christ. That is the shining hope of our faith.

So we are all saved from hell if we want to be. But this is where it gets interesting. Often, we simply don't want to be saved, and it is precisely this willful rejection of God's love that the doctrine of hell, rightly understood, is getting at. Hell is not a place where God punishes us - rather, it is the dark nowhere that we end up if we reject all God's invitations to love and forgiveness. We need to forget the sadistic barbeque, and remember instead of one of Jesus' images - of someone choosing not to be at the feast, but out in the dark and the cold. The poet Dante had it right when he described the depth of hell not as fire but as ice. It is where we find ourselves if we burrow away from the warmth of God's love, into the icy depths of our own dislike.

A fellow curate suggested in class recently that hell was full of people who cannot accept that they are forgiven. 'Yes,' nodded the wise priest leading the class, 'yes: and drivers of e-Scooters.'

I hope and I pray that hell is empty; that all of us, in the end, are freed by God's love. I want to defend God's absolute freedom to keep on working to save us, in eternity if needs be. But wiser Christians than me have taught that we do still need an idea of hell to warn us off the temptation to reject God's love. The Jesuit Karl Rahner said that he could believe that bad luck or terrible circumstance excused the mistakes of every other sinner in the world, but he still needed a concept of hell to remain aware of *his own* temptation to reject God's love and God's forgiveness. God will not force us to accept that love. We are free to choose. Hell simply represents the emptiness that is our alternative.

We are free to choose, but God will go to the ends of the earth to save us. The good news of Easter is that Jesus has gone to the very darkest places and dragged us, all of us, out by the hand. This is what the medieval church called 'the harrowing of hell'. He descended into hell, but he rose again, bringing us all with him.

We celebrate the beginning of that descent, that rescue mission, this week, in the incarnation. We will find God in the straw and the manure of the stable, meeting us in the depth of our frailty and our neediness.

These are the lengths to which love will go. Perhaps, in the end, it *is* all about love.