

 *St Paul's Anglican Parish of Ipswich*  
**SUNDAY SERMON**

Sermon on Mark 9:38-50

*Delivered by Rev'd Steve McMahon on the 30<sup>th</sup> September 2018*

Many years before I entered the priesthood, I heard a sermon by a real Bible-thumping Ulsterman. Though not as powerfully built as Ian Paisley, he was just as powerfully voiced with a thick Belfast accent which added gravitas to his preaching, particularly when he was expounding on his favourite subject, Hell.

Some say that Hell is being forced to watch England getting spifflicated at the Gabba. Others say that it's the thought of being locked in a room watching Nigella cooking but being forbidden to taste her latest chocolate fondant. However, this particular priest, Fr. Avery, was absolute and fundamental in his understanding of what Hell was actually all about:

“I'm talking about Hell, where the worm gnaws at your private parts all day and all night! Hell where there is unquenchable fire! Hell, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth!!”

It was at this point that a wag at the back of the congregation piped up “What about those who haven't got any teeth?” Without missing a beat Avery responded, “Teeth will be provided!”.

American president Benjamin Franklin once said “In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.” And that's by and large true - the one thing that we can say with 100% certainty is that one day we will die - all of us! There's no getting away from it. This begs the question, what happens to us after death?

Karl Marx once famously said that religion was the opiate of the people because the promise of an afterlife led the poor people to put up with unjust social conditions - a sort of give now, get later situation. However, the atheist says that there is nothing after death so do what you like today because you will have nothing to pay afterwards. This leads the rich and powerful to think they can get away with their oppressions.

Now, it is the nature of all religions, that they recognise that our deeds are imperishable. So, according to religion, if you do evil now you will be sent to Hell. This rankles with many - how can a God of love ever send people to Hell? Where is the love in such an action?

The truth is that God doesn't need to send anyone to Hell - we are all perfectly capable of getting there ourselves! Our passion for evil is a pretty good route map allowing us to find our own way. What God does do, is to send His Son to save us from Hell. Remember Jesus' teaching in John's gospel that “This is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.”

Jn 3:19

But what is Hell anyway? In the Bible there are two words that we always translate as “Hell”. The first of these is a neutral word, Sheol, which simply was the place all went to sleep when they died, whether they were good or wicked. The Old Testament is littered with references to it and it's worth remembering that throughout the large part of the Judaic history, there was no concept of a resurrection - that did not really come to the fore until the prophet Daniel appeared on the scene.

The second word is the word Gehenna which was the name of the tip just outside of Jerusalem. There would be a permanent fire going there for people to burn their rubbish along with the bodies of any who were considered to have died in a state of sin. Anything that wasn't burned would be consumed by the maggots that swarmed there. It was effectively, landfill, and Jesus used the name of the rubbish tip when he made today's sayings - if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two and to be thrown onto the rubbish tip.

The problem is that humankind has made this planet a rubbish tip. We see and hear about it all the time in the media. We are constantly raping the planet of her resources and discarding them without a care whilst we continue to contribute to global warming by only paying lip service to the idea of conservation.

This isn't a new thing either. However, the problem we face is that the Church has often been particularly slow to pick up on the problem. Indeed, the church has sometimes exacerbated the problem: St Martin of Tours, for example, once hacked down a number of trees in the name of Christianity. But even more recently, the Church has gained considerable income from investment in environmentally dubious projects. We forget the very strong command in the book of Genesis that we are to look after the planet. We are merely stewards of God's creation.

And it's no good simply expecting countries or even companies to lead the way. Individually, we all have a sacred duty to protect the planet. Whether it be ensuring we recycle, turn off electric appliances at night or plant an additional tree to help nature, we can all do something - something which, on its own may be a small gesture, but coupled with similar small gestures all over will make a significant change. It may be slightly more expensive or may require us to make a little extra effort but Jesus warns us that no sacrifice is too great to make if it stops us destroying ourselves like a load of garbage - both physically and spiritually.

Jesus promised us that we all have a chance to avoid the rubbish tip and enter the kingdom of God. Even the thief on the cross was allowed a last-minute declaration of faith that would result in his salvation. The most quoted Bible saying in all the world “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life,” reminds us that we all have a “Get out of Jail free” card in the form of our belief in Jesus. But it's up to us to take evil seriously and to resist temptation. Sin - our sin - hurts God's loving heart but, and it's an important but, he always allows us to repent.

Whether Hell is really a place of fire like Fr. Avery preached and whether anybody is left alive there is something we'll never know in this life - perhaps we'll never know at all if we allow Jesus to save us from destruction and give us resurrection. The last chance for us to make a choice between heaven and hell comes to everyone at some point. Jesus urges us not.