



Opening Prayer for Ordinary Time

God of adventure and growth,
open our hearts, ready our minds
and fire our imaginations,
so that as we gather together before you,
and ponder the life-giving stories of Jesus,
we might discover more of your goodness,
and be swept up by the Holy Spirit
as she nurtures, disturbs and inspires us
on our journey into fullness of life.

Amen

'Starter for Ten' Discussion Question

How do you understand the concept of Hell? Does this make sense to you, or is it something you struggle with?

Prayers of Thanks and Praise

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour;
he has looked with favour on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed;
**the Almighty has done great things for me
and holy is his name.**

He has mercy on those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

**He has shown strength with his arm
and has scattered the proud in their conceit,**
casting down the mighty from their thrones
and lifting up the lowly.

**He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.**

He has come to the aid of his servant Israel,
to remember his promise of mercy,
**the promise made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and his children for ever.**

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and shall be forever.
Amen

Prayers of Renewal

God of love and life,
you came to reconcile all things to yourself in Christ,
and to renew the heavens and the earth.
Trusting in your goodness,
we bring before you those things in our lives,
and the life of the world we share,
in need of renewal:

Silence is kept for a few moments...

Set us free us to follow you, and grant us that peace
which passes all our understanding.
Amen

Reading Matthew 13:24 – 30, 36 – 43

Sermon

When I lived in Birmingham and walked into the city centre, it wasn't unusual to come across a variety of street preachers, out in the area near the Bullring shopping centre. There was one man who used to have a portable speaker, who went around telling anybody who got within earshot that they were going to hell if they did not repent, and accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. One afternoon, when I was quite tired and really not in the mood for being shouted at, my patience snapped. I replied, "Come on, mate; Southend isn't so bad these days!". Needless to say, he was not impressed, and the tirade which followed made me regret my flippancy. Perhaps the lesson is never to mess with hellfire and brimstone street preachers! Thinking back on that encounter, in the light of today's reading from Matthew, which is the second in a collection of parables in this chapter, made me ponder my own teaching on hell, divine judgement and the wrath of God, and it wasn't a comfortable experience, though not perhaps for the reasons you might first think.

Having been a Christian for almost two decades now, I've interacted to a greater or lesser degree with a range of theological standpoints and styles of preaching. This has led me to conclude that the issues of hell, divine judgement and the wrath of God are like Marmite. For some, they are taboo topics, seldom if ever preached upon because they are just too uncomfortable for congregation and preacher alike! For others, they are foundational themes which permeate all that is preached or taught in those contexts, and if not explicitly mentioned, they're clearly present just below the surface. Reflecting on my own ministry leads me to conclude that I am in the former camp, and that this is not a good place to be – for at least two good reasons. Firstly, it implicitly concedes the theological 'territory', if as it is a 'given' that conservative evangelical standpoints on the questions of hell, divine judgement, and the wrath of God are the only valid approaches one might take. Secondly, and far more importantly, it is hard to address

issues like the problem of evil, interfaith dialogue and what we mean by salvation without also addressing these challenging topics. Thus, I've now realised that it's about time I talked about hell...

However, despite having no desire to follow that Birmingham street preacher into becoming a hellfire and damnation kind of guy, I know that I'm nonetheless straying into very dangerous territory. Rob Bell is an American theologian, author and minister. He founded and led a mega church, that grew into a congregation of thousands, but was forced to leave in 2011, following the publication of *Love Wins*. This book – which I heartily recommend – explores whether it makes any sense to think of salvation as being about a small and select number of Christians going to heaven, whilst everybody else spends eternity suffering the torments and punishments of hell. For those who didn't accept Jesus as Saviour before they died, Bell wonders, "Is this the sacred calling of Christians – to announce that there is no hope?".

As you can imagine, given everything that I have said thus far, Bell's *Love Wins* caused a great deal of controversy, not least with people angry that the apparent certainties of who is and isn't going to make it into heaven were being undermined, and that their 'biblical picture' of hell was being challenged. Yet, we know what Jesus taught, don't we? It's right there in today's Gospel passage. The weeds springing up amidst the wheat of the true believers will be uprooted in the final judgment and burnt in the unending fires of hell. Except, it isn't quite so simple. For starters, the image of hell as being about "fury, wrath, fire, torment, judgment, eternal agony, endless anguish" owes more to the fourteenth century depiction found within Dante's *Inferno*, and its hold upon the medieval imagination, than to anything in the Bible itself. The Hebrew Scriptures don't speak of hell, but of *Sheol*, which is a shadowy and mysterious place where people go when they die, described in only vague terms. Jesus himself uses two main words: *Gehenna*, which was an actual place outside Jerusalem, and *Hades* as a Greek version of the concept of *Sheol*. Neither reflects Dante's

circles of hell with increasingly awful punishments and torments, not even coming close in fact.

So, why the differences between popular imagery and biblical truth? The profound mismatch reflects a tendency to ask one image within an eclectic group of stories to carry too much weight. In the Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:1 – 9), the wheat represented those fruits yielded by God's words taking root in somebody's heart, whereas it relates to the children of God's kingdom in the Parable of the Weeds (Matthew 13:24 – 30). We must beware attaching too many weights to one image; the parables simply do not work that neatly! Yet, what is clear when we look across the range of parables in Matthew using his formula of 'weeping and gnashing of teeth' is that there are "very real experiences and consequences" involved in "rejecting our God-given goodness and humanity". Having found those quickest to fuss about the fate of others after death are often the slowest to respond to "the hells on earth right now", Bell contends that Jesus didn't "use hell to try to compel [others] to believe in God, so they wouldn't burn when they die". Instead, he warned the religious insiders about "the consequences of straying from the God-given calling and identity to show the world God's love".

For me, this is the rub. Salvation isn't about escaping to heaven, or pie-in-the-sky when you die, but fullness of life *both* in the here-and-now *and* the new creation breaking in because of Christ's death and resurrection. Hell is very real, as way too many people know already from personal experience, but so is the possibility of transformation, and this possibility transcends the boundary of death. To borrow an insightful phrase from Rowan Williams, "God has an eternity to work with us", and this means that it is not impossible that salvation might indeed be available for all of us, if we can cope with the searing and agonisingly painful truth of ourselves when God confronts us with it. I find Williams's take on praying 'save us from the time of trial' within the Lord's Prayer being about an openness on our part to 'Christlike

change' in the here-and-now, so that this after-death process is less painful, a helpful idea. It takes seriously both the realities of sin and evil, which are far from being of no consequence (they cost God the cross, after all), and the fact that, in the end, love really does win.

So, what can we take away from this? Well, firstly, I'm with Rob Bell in taking it as read that it is not for me or for anyone else to speculate about the ultimate destiny of another. As today's parable hints at, it might surprise us as to who is among the wheat and who is amongst the weeds! Secondly, God respects our choices and so presumably we *could* choose to reject God, but the thrust of the biblical narrative is that nobody is irredeemable, however difficult that may be for the rest of us to stomach. And thirdly, thank goodness that God actually *does* judge us, because God is the one who loved us enough to die for us. The wrath of God is real, just as hell is alas all too real – how could God not be angry at injustice? However, so is the love of God, and in the final account, as Rob Bell rightly says, love wins. For this, and for the grace and goodness of God which enables everyone to begin anew, thanks be to God. Amen

Prayers of Intercession

Lord's Prayer

Blessing