

Hell

The idea of Hell is one that the modern mind stands off from. The notion of eternal punishment is rejected off-hand by the mentality which shrinks from inflicting the slightest punishment on criminals. There is not a thought given to the victims of those criminals. The conditions in most prisons are not punitive. They are actual luxury to a large proportion of the inmates. In prisons where the conditions are not so good as the result of overcrowding and where the inmates can mix freely, the greatest burden apparently is the company of each other.

But is this unrelieved sentimentality the correct angle from which the difficult doctrine of Hell is to be viewed? What is sentimentality? Perhaps we might define it as a surface approach based on emotion, one which shies off from reality and which necessarily swings violently from one extreme to the other as our feeling changes from benevolence to anger. Today we lavish benefits on the needy and afflicted, and tomorrow – in a new mood – we launch an atom bomb on a city.

Those outbursts of generosity are seldom performed at sacrifice to ourselves. It is easy to play around with

other people's lives, to spend money out of other people's pockets, and to be forgiving and sympathetic to evil-doers when we ourselves have not been the sufferers.

That sentimentalism is a most dangerous commodity. It is a fine way of sweeping poisonous dust under the carpet, of postponing awkward decisions, of saving up trouble for someone else, of putting the present problem on to posterity. That outlook can be totally irresponsible and frequently resolves itself down to a mere playing to the gallery and to sheer dishonesty. But it always enters in when we lose our grip on principles and laws and rules. So we must beware not to insert the question of Hell into that sort of computer for we know the solution which will come out. It will be an answer which will dodge the real issues.

The Final 'No' to God

The idea of Hell is: That without the possibility of shelving the issue, it has to deal with the hardened offender in the spiritual order, one who has managed to turn his life into the ultimate sin of rejecting God in a manner that can be called deliberate. Every conceivable influence has been brought to bear on him towards inducing him to soften. I do not say 'to reform,' for God is indulgent to weakness to the extent of continually forgiving, provided that the slightest element of repentance enters in. It is not that sort of offender who is in question here, but the one who is a formal candidate for Hell. He may not be a worldly criminal at all but one who has been acclaimed as admirable and famous. But in him is a vital lack. He will not give what God requires for an inhabitant of Heaven. I repeat there is no possibility of postponing the issue. Everything has been offered and failed. Everything has

reduced itself to a final issue: yes or no, and the candidate firmly answers 'no'.

But let us turn back again from that awful final moment for another look at current conceptions of justice and consequent attitudes towards wrong-doing,

Should Wrongdoers be Penalised or Children Punished?

I must not be interpreted as saying that criminals are irretrievably bad or that they must be cruelly treated. I would believe in neither as is evidenced by the work of the Legion. But I do insist that our outlook must be characterised by principles, methods and common sense. Reform will only be achieved by presenting the correct motives. A mere pandering to misbehaviour is calculated to do harm, and even to make popular heroes of the more spectacular criminals. Basically the right motives are supplied by religion, and a vital part of religion is that we get away with nothing. No matter how much we postpone the reckoning, it is waiting for us – somewhere.

It is the divine law that a man has to pay for his misdeeds even to the last farthing. That payment will be made either in the next world, or in this world, or in both. It is not a law of vengeance. It is a law of love based on God's idea that man is responsible and should so far as is possible to him earn Heaven. We have not to accept the latter fact on faith alone. Even in our own obscure fashion we can reason it out. Is a parent really kind to his child by allowing it to do what it likes? Surely he is harming it if he allows it to go unchecked along improper paths? The answer which will be given to this is that of course the child should be admonished, told what is right and urged to do better. To what extent does that really meet the case?

Of course there should be no undue severity. The child should be reasoned with and very patiently, because a moulding is in question. One does not perform a delicate operation by violent movements. But supposing a child is resistant to kindly handling?

Responsibility Means Being Answerable

The fact has to be faced up to that there are really bold, bad children. You can see the Original Sin showing in some form from a very early age. You simply cannot let that tendency shape the course of things in someone you love. It is not enough to keep on saying to a child in whom evil is beginning to form: 'Oh darling, you should not do that.' Something more than that helpless attitude is necessary, and it spells out to punishment of some shape or form. It is only by praise and blame and penalty that standards can be set, and the difference between right and wrong taught to young minds. In what way are people to learn what is wrong if nothing happens but words when they do wrong?

Then there is the sovereign aspect of responsibility, the element which distinguishes the man from the animal. Not that an animal is totally irresponsible; the whole training of animals is based on the fact to a certain extent they can be made to realise what is expected of them. But essentially man is a responsible being who is intended to take account of his acts as having profound reaction on himself and on others, in time and into eternity. In the measure that this sense of responsibility is absent, a man descends into the animal category and as such becomes a separate and distinct problem; the problem of the irresponsibles who must indeed be handled with velvet gloves. For one cannot punish if there is no responsibility.

One can only impose restraints and protect others. That is a different question.

'Treatment' the Modern Remedy

Therefore it goes to the very essence of things that one must be held responsible for one's actions. But is anyone contending to the contrary? Yes, the whole idea of this article is that the generality of people are contradicting the idea of responsibility. The community is by its attitude effectively denying the existence of responsibility. It is letting a crude sentimentality run away with it. In this process too many psychologists are giving a false lead. They are found proposing a philosophy of crime which contradicts common sense, because every normal person knows when he has done wrong. But those experts are proclaiming that what looks like misbehaviour really springs from sources outside the control of the offender, such as heredity, environment or mental infirmity. No doubt those things play a part but to cause it to be supposed that in the ordinary case there is no responsibility and no sin – and hence no liability to penalty – is a monstrous contention which does infinite harm. But there it is. The new Gospel is: There is no such thing as sin. Misbehaviour is pathological, so rehabilitate. Give 'treatment,' which means advice and drugs, especially the latter.

The destructive effect of all this on the community and on the character of the individual is wholesale. The man who has learned from the operation of this code that can get away with almost anything is a ruined personality. He has been reduced to that debased category already referred to, the irresponsible man who is virtually an animal. That man is no good for this world and it is only God who can see how he is any good for the next world.

In that riot of sentimentality the idea of justice perishes. There is no such talk today about the reign of justice. It is not very clear what is meant by this. For the biggest talkers about it are often the greatest offenders against it. Justice and sentimentality will at least half the time be in opposition to each other, and the popular conception of justice is only sentimentality.

What exactly is 'justice' as it is being trumpeted from the platform? It is to be gathered that it includes the freeing of everyone from some form of oppression. But this would amount to anarchy, because it is the idea of many that any sort of authority is oppression. And apparently any code of morality amounts to a tyranny; people should be allowed to be as promiscuous and abominable as they like, as pornographic as the profiteers want to make them, and virtually as misconducted as they want to be. The great majority who are tormented by all that misconduct have no rights at all.

Misbehaviour of the Law

The Law, which is supposed to be justice incarnate, is deliberately letting loose criminals on the community which is being terrorised by them. Or else culprits are being given sentences which have little relation to the offences committed. In these operations the courts do not hesitate to manipulate the code of law which they are supposed to be administering. They are removing the deterrent against misconduct and thereby penalising the general community. The law is there on the statute book. If it is too severe, let it be modified or removed. But while it is there, let it be administered. The misuse of suspensory sentences and probation has made a mockery of the law. Apparently it has not been realised that when

a sufficient proportion of guilty persons have been let off, it has then become unjust to sentence anyone; so that the law would have become a universal, one hundred-per-cent injustice.

Here is a current example of what can happen when all guidelines have been abandoned. A group of thugs beat up a bus driver. The driver went at full speed to a police station and brought about their arrest. Subsequently the magistrate read them a nice little homily and turned them loose. The battered victim looked on incredulously and then suggested to the magistrate that he should give them sweets to take home. The angered magistrate, demanding for himself a consideration which he was unwilling to grant to the victim or to the community, at once sentenced the busman to imprisonment for contempt of court. He quickly withdrew the sentence, visualising no doubt the outraged headings in the morrow's newspapers. But the fact remains that he mollycoddled the culprits and rough-handled their victim who should as primary public policy be protected in the discharge of his duty.

It is a mockery of injustice thus to substitute for the real article such exercises of injustice, sentimentality, irresponsibility and scandalous inconsistency.

Someone has said that civilisation is the living under a just code of law. If that is true, it is the cruellest injustice to a people to trick around with the law and bring it into contempt.

To give the general populace the impression that ill-inclined individuals may do what they like is destructive. It is a violation of that central principle of individual responsibility for one's actions. It substitutes for civilisation a process of demoralisation and disintegration.

The Ways of Divine Justice

Is that senseless chaos the sort of justice we are going to receive from God? Far from it. Indeed the only consolation which we have in the mess of this world is that God's superior dispensation exists to rectify all that maladministration and injustice.

To each of us he grants that freedom of will without which there could be no such thing as merit or demerit. He rewards good. He punishes evil; all this being subject to an outpouring of love and infinite allowance for the weakness with which it is dealing. But there is to be a point where repentance and repayment enter in. If there is anything in the scriptures which is made plain, it is that. A man must repent of his sin and expiate it before he can enter the Kingdom of Heaven. And here is where the divine law and the human law intermingle. Sometimes a man is contrite during his life, and sometimes not until the very end of it. Sometimes he pays the debt of sin through a direct punishment for it, and sometimes through the afflictions of life, and sometimes through good works. But usually he presents himself to the final Court of Judgement without his full debt having been cancelled. Then he will have to face up to full responsibility and to genuine justice. Nothing stained can enter Heaven. This entails the Catholic doctrine of Purgatory. The Protestant belief that an act of faith alone saves outright and places a person in Heaven, does violence to the responsibility of man which God himself has built his system on.

But there is an ultimate rung in that ladder of responsibility. It is Hell.

As I have said, the idea of Hell is one that the modern man stands off from. The notion of eternal punishment is rejected offhand by the mentality which forgets the

wrong which has been done and shrinks from inflicting the slightest penalty on the offender. But Hell faces up to ultimate responsibility. In contradistinction to Purgatory where the question was that of evening out the balance-sheet of life for a contrite soul, the problem of Hell is the awful one of a person who is resolutely opposed to God. Apart altogether from the degree of his sinfulness, he is unrepentant. His sins are not the main things. The special fact is that he does not want God. He is against God. His life had at some stage settled down into that current and finally froze into it.

The whole history of God's dealing with souls shows how much he is willing to put up with in the way of misconduct. Human monsters, appalling specimens of evil-living, demons of cruelty and destruction, seize at a grace, sometimes at their last minute, and are incredibly saved subject to the loving mechanism of Purgatory.

Problem of Final Obduracy: Pride May Explain

But some cannot be prevailed upon. No grace wins them. They have finally established in themselves an incompatibility with God. As the religious phrase puts it, they are finally unrepentant, obdurate. What is God to do with them? With full realisation of what is entailed, they repudiate Heaven and Purgatory. They have to go somewhere. The only abode that remains is that place which was prepared for the Devil and his bad angels, and that is where their hearts draw them. Their reason is not clouded. Only an act of submission is required from them, but that they will not offer.

Here we find ourselves in the depths of incomprehension. Of what nature is that obduracy? Whence is that incompatibility between them and God

that they definitely do not want him? They prefer the unspeakable deprivation of God which means the loss of everything that is to our minds good and desirable.

No greater mystery than this exists, but it is not without parallel. The same feature presents itself in the fall of the angels. It may even seem to us to be stranger than the human case inasmuch as the angels were spiritual beings with an intellect far superior to ours. Yet they most deliberately rejected God. And now we are considering their counterparts in the human race who echo the defiance of those angels whose war-cry was: 'We will not serve!'

The nearest we can get to an understanding of that incomprehensibility is to consider the workings of pride in ourselves. Of course it is always stirring in us in some form. Very occasionally it really shows its teeth. When we look back over our life, we find some occasions when it nearly ruined us. Some will, divine or human, clashed with ours and we reacted in an alarming fashion. We were determined. We told ourselves that nothing would prevail on us to give way even though that meant our destruction. Happily we did yield, probably because there was more rage than malignity in us. But we had looked into the abyss, and from that situation we can draw a line and catch a sort of glimpse of the obduracy of Lucifer and of the lost soul.

Why Does God Create a Soul He knows Will Go to Hell?

So God does not really condemn a soul to Hell. The soul goes there in the face of everything that God can do within his law to turn it back. It may be said: But God is omnipotent. Cannot he put forth his grace to the point

of forcing himself on that soul? But God according to his own law cannot do that violence to a soul. He gave it freedom of will and his gifts are without repentance. To give it and to take it away when a person is about to use it in a wrong way would be as radical a step as to substitute one person for another.

This brings up another objection. If God foresees that a soul will go to Hell, why does he not refrain from creating that soul? This lands us in even deeper incomprehension for has not God, in seeing that soul, already given it some form of existence so that he would be radically altering his plan?

Even if we short-circuit that abstruse position and suppose that God decides not to call into existence a soul which he will see end up by finally resisting him, would that not involve an interference with the total principle of the freedom of the human will which God himself had established?

Here is another strange thought. It has been said that any existence is better than none. Therefore a soul in Hell is in a preferable condition to non-existence. If the Devil were offered obliteration, he would not accept it. Would the same not apply to the soul in Hell similarly offered obliteration?

But there is no use pursuing these suppositions. The problem goes beyond our ken. It is part of the unknowability and incomprehensibility of God. It lies in the realm of pure faith. We must view the question from the angle that God is sheer perfection. The fact that he does a thing means that it is right. Everything which he does is based on love. The very worst people are the subject of that love, including those who scorn him and walk so firmly through the dread portals of Hell. It has

been said that Hell itself is a mercy. This baffles us. So we must fall back on faith.

I have previously suggested that we are less able to understand God than a monkey is able to understand our complex life. God's operations infinitely elude even the wildest imaginings. Note that he takes count of and remembers every thought of every man who has ever lived, and traces the effect of that thought on all other men through history. Yet this is but elementary to God. So let us beware of foolish little reasonings as to what is kind in God and what is not.

Here is a last practical word in regard to entering on a dispute with anyone about Hell. Make sure that it is based on a mutual belief in God. It would be futile to defend one doctrine with a person who refutes all doctrines; or to debate the Trinity with one who rejects God; or to argue in favour of the Immaculate Conception with one who denies Original Sin altogether. Such discussions would be as the slang expression puts it: a dead loss.

Mary, dear Mother, obtain for us sense that we will abstain from talking foolishly about the dread doctrine of Hell, because psychologically the next thing is that we would be recklessly straying along the paths which lead to the place itself.