

In purgatory, we are told, there is duration, but not time as we know it in our present world of sense. God in his mercy gives us time here to become saints, and saints we must become if we are to fulfil our destiny. Fidelity to whatever obedience our vocation brings us makes us saints. Yet we shrink from faithfulness to that steady plodding, so often apparently unrewarding. We shrink because it is hard, ordinary and uninteresting. Do we think enough of purgatory, that unknown second stage of the life that is granted us, that lies between death and the vision of God? It may be a long dreary period of hard frustrating purification, all the harder because it is purely passive, a lonely waiting for what we long for so intensely, more rigorous and wearying in its demands than anything we could have suffered here. Yet necessary because of the graces we have neglected and the opportunities we have missed; necessary to fit us, as they would have done had we used them, for the vision of God's purity, the sharing of which will be our eternal joy and satisfaction.



## HELL AND HEAVEN

HENRY ST JOHN, O.P.

**I**F we turn to the Scriptures, under the guidance of the teaching Church, for enlightenment concerning the doctrine of everlasting punishment, we shall find two things stated in them with painful clarity by our Lord himself. There is a final punishment for the unrepentant; it is eternal and it is fire. *If thy hand scandalize thee, cut it off. It is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into unquenchable fire; where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not extinguished* (Mark ix, 42). And again: *Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, which was prepared for the devil and his angels* (Matt. xxv, 41-42). In the moving passage too, in St John's gospel, where our Lord sets out his teaching about himself as the way, the truth and the life, under the image of the vine and the branches, the same warning is contained; that burning by fire is the inevitable result of complete

separation from him. *I am the vine; you the branches; he that abideth in me, and I in him, the same beareth much fruit: for without me you can do nothing. If any one abide not in me he shall be cast forth as a branch, and shall wither: and they shall gather him up and cast him into the fire and he burneth* (John xv, 5-6).

It is of course clear that this language is the language of imagery; the Johannine passage is expressly so, those from the synoptics trace back to the Jewish apocalyptic literature, in which the name Gehinnom, derived from the valley to the south of Jerusalem where the city's refuse was burned, was applied to the place where the wicked were punished. The Greek word *geenna* in the Marcan text, translated 'hell' in the English versions, comes from the Aramaic *Gehinnam*, the valley of Hinnom. This must have been the word used by our Lord, and the imagery associated with it was chosen by him as his way of teaching truth to his immediate hearers. We cannot doubt that he intended this way to be continued in use as the permanent standard by which that truth should be preserved and passed on down the ages. The Church, which is commissioned by Christ to do this passing on, has in fact defined very little about the doctrine of hell, but when it has defined it has always done so within the context and meaning of the key words used by our Lord: *eternal* and *fire*.

This does not mean that these words do not need interpretation. Our Lord used the common thought forms of his own age; these were readily adaptable to the understanding of his hearers. But thought forms change and develop in succeeding ages, and the thought forms of a past generation sometimes become obstacles in their literal acceptance, to a more perfect understanding of the truths they were designed to express, because the light shed on them by new scientific, historical or philosophical knowledge reveals their limitations. On this account the better and further-seeing minds in each generation seek to set the unchanging truths that Christ has revealed and his Church has defined, in a new context of contemporary thought. It is here that the scholars, in their various disciplines, play an important part. Their work is fruitful for the understanding of the Faith so long as it is carried out under the authoritative guidance of the Church's magisterium.

Thus all down the ages, from the New Testament until today, the dogma of Redemption has never changed in its essentials.

Yet its interpretation has varied greatly. During a long period of the Church's history, when the habit of mind of western civilization was predominantly legalistic, it was seen almost exclusively in forms of a penal substitutionary view of atonement, that has appeared inadequate and distorted to later ages. Similarly where the conception of a three-storied universe held sway in men's minds, crude and materialistic ideas of heaven and hell were inevitable, and the Resurrection and Ascension of Christ and the great assize of the last Judgment were conceived in spatial and terrestrial terms. Even today we may think instinctively of hell in terms of physical agony prolonged in infinite succession; or we may picture it imaginatively as we have seen it depicted in some old book of devotion: a very material body devoured by very material flames and under torture from horrible serpents or devils. This crude horrific imagery, common in the past, can still unconsciously dominate our conceptions and disturb them.

There is then a dress in which successive generations must of necessity clothe the absolute and immutable truth of revelation. It is the dress of contemporary human ideas, a dress that is sometimes crude and primitive, sometimes more sophisticated; a dress that changes with the succession of discarded theories, but also with the genuine growth of rational knowledge. This process of change is inevitable, because God willed to reveal himself only through the medium of human minds, and, since the recipients of his truth are human also, never does he transcend by his omnipotence the limitations inherent in the nature of that mind. As Catholics we believe that the supreme teaching authority of the Church, though thus humanly limited, is nevertheless divinely safeguarded from error throughout this process. That is why we claim that those who place themselves under its guidance will be enabled to preserve and live by the essential truth of God's revelation, while labouring to perfect the human knowledge in the context of which, in any particular age, it must be set.

With these presuppositions in mind we can examine the teaching of the Church concerning the punishment of hell. It is by definition eternal, and it is fire. At once we realize that since it is eternal it must be *life* of a kind. God does not in fact annihilate his creation. Attempts have been made by devout non-Catholics to argue for conditional immortality. A saying of our Lord is sometimes alleged in support of this view: *Fear ye not them that*

kill the body, and are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him that can destroy both the soul and body into hell (Matt. x, 28). It is argued that natural immortality is a Greek not a biblical concept. In the Bible immortality is seen as God's gift in Christ. Disintegration of the human personality would follow as the natural result of the refusal of God's gift by persistence in sin.<sup>1</sup> Universalism too, as old as Origen, is attractive to the human heart; the belief that somehow all men will come at the last, whether in this life or the next, to crave for and accept God's mercy by true repentance. But the gift of free will is not subject to force by omnipotent power. God waits to be gracious; men can refuse to return to him; they do so persistently, why not for ever? This hard verdict of the head is the answer also to the question: why not a second chance on the farther side of death? Why must the end of this life fix for ever the will of man in submission or antagonism to God who made him. The ultimate answer to these questions is not however an answer of human reason, it is the answer of God's Word interpreting to us through the Church's authority the written word of Scripture.

The punishment of hell therefore, in Scripture and the teaching of the Church, is life of a kind, and it is eternal. It is the life given by nature, itself a gift of God. It is the necessary basis of God's other gift to us in Christ, the gift of supernatural life. When that gift is finally and irrevocably rejected the punishment which ensues falls upon the surviving life, that with which we were born. This life is of its nature eternal. It will be lived, that is, outside and beyond time. We can only begin to understand it therefore if we think of it first in terms of the loss of that sharing in the eternal life of God for which, by grace, he has destined us in Christ. St Paul expresses this truth in words beyond which it is hardly possible to go. He speaks of the Church which is Christ's body, and of which we are members as *the fullness of him who is filled all in all* (Eph. i, 23). And again: *that Christ may dwell by faith in your hearts: that being rooted and founded in charity you may be able to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length, and height, and depth, to know also the charity of Christ, which*

<sup>1</sup> The Greek word translated destroy (*apolesai*) in Matthew 10, 28 and its Vulgate equivalent *perdere*, have this as their primary meaning. They are however both used to mean *lose utterly without being destroyed*, notably in this same chapter of Matthew, v. 39. In its context therefore the Greek will not bear the meaning that this view seeks to place upon it.

*surpasseth all knowledge, that you may be filled unto all the fullness of God* (Eph. iii, 17-19).

When that fullness is reached in the Beatific vision our finite being will be completed, perfected and wholly satisfied by the life of God that will be ours in Christ. There will be nothing more that we can desire or deserve, nothing that we can need. God, his goodness and love, will possess the whole of our being, in such a way that our life will be one of perfect happiness. Of course on earth we do not fully grasp its meaning; though grace has already begun this life in us, the glory that is its perfection is still hidden from our eyes. If we did comprehend it we should never hesitate, never look back, never fall away. We should leave nothing undone to secure this vision of God that is his ultimate gift to us. But we can know it in the obscure light of faith, we can see it with increasing clearness by the gifts of the Holy Ghost, which act in answer to the charity in us as it breaks down the obstacles between ourselves and God.

We can even get glimpses of the utter joy of heaven by human analogies. We do experience human happiness, sheer and undiluted, for a fleeting moment or two. The happiness of being wholly absorbed in something outside ourselves; a story of intense and gripping interest, a breathtaking glimpse of scenery, an entrancing sunset, a piece of utterly joyful news, a moment of sheer self-giving in love; these for a space may occupy the whole of us to the exclusion of ourselves and all else besides. Then our total being is filled with the possession of that one thing only, in sheer concentration of joy; for an instant or two, and then it passes. That is a pale and momentary image of heaven. Heaven, the vision of God is all that, infinitely multiplied in intensity, contained in a single timeless instant that never moves; no looking forward, no looking back, a standing, unchanging instant that never passes. That is the meaning of being filled with all the fullness of God. Yet having said that we have said virtually nothing, mere words the reality of which only the Holy Spirit can show us; *for eye hath not seen nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man what things God hath prepared for them that love him. But to us God hath revealed them by his spirit. For the Spirit searcheth all things, yea the deep things of God* (I Cor. ii, 9-10).

Hell then is the loss of all this, the loss of God, who alone can fulfil and complete our finite being. It is to enter eternity and

yet to be separated there from God, separated by our own deliberate choosing. That separation would be more terrible than any imaginable suffering, for God is all that is and therefore the source of all happiness. Absence of God means nothingness, and nothingness is a terrible thought to contemplate. So the theologians teach us that hell reduces the sinner hardened and fixed in antagonism against God to an almost complete negative, the loss of all that is save bare existence; the *poena damni*. But we must not confine our thought of the punishment of hell to what is negative, an existence without God. That is no doubt its radical element. But God remains the Lord even of those who reject him; he created them in love, and, in the sense that his infinite will, as it has ever been, is that they should love him, he loves them still, even though their finite wills have become set in perpetual rejection of his love. The submission of the finite will causes the soul to be filled with all the fullness of God. God's love accepted thrills the whole structure of its being with the physical effect of its happiness. But with the will in rebellion, the soul is emptied of God's fullness. Antagonism to God's rejected love penetrates the very structure of its being with the physical effect of undying hatred. This is the *poena sensus* which the common teaching of the Church represents as a real, extrinsically caused pain in the lost soul, effected in it after the manner of material fire.<sup>2</sup>

For the image under which the God of love and his power are so often represented in the Scriptures is fire; from the burning bush of Exodus to the tongues of flame at Pentecost, and thence to the fire imagery of the Apocalypse. The fire of God's love when the created will finally accepts it in the Beatific vision, causes the soul, and, after the resurrection, the body through the soul, to become ardent and glowing with the glory of the fullness of divine life. But where it encounters in hell the antagonism of undying hate in the created will, there the soul, and with it one day the body, burns and consumes with the dark pain and frustration its cold hatred generates, a burning and consuming which is eternal. *Because the Lord thy God is a consuming fire, a jealous God* (Deut. iv, 24; Heb. xii, 29).

<sup>2</sup> This is only one of several speculations current among theologians as to the nature of the *poena sensus* of hell, which the Church, interpreting the *ipsissima verba* of Christ, insists upon as extrinsically caused, eternal and comparable with material fire.

We must realize that there is no time in hell, any more than there is in heaven. Everlasting punishment means not succession, but a standing instant; no past, no future, just a now of utter emptiness and frustration; of having lost all, and of hating, yet intensely needing, that which has been lost. We must believe that there can come a moment in the life of an immortal soul, created in God's image, loved by him and designed to share the glory of his presence, when by consistent and deliberate rebellion against the known truth, and wholly through its own responsibility, it becomes fixed and static in complete antagonism to God; from friendship it passes to perpetual enmity, from love, however intermittent, to hatred. When that state is reached there is no alternative to the state of separation, for to admit such a soul, were it possible, to the face-to-face vision of God, would be an even greater punishment than its eternal loss.

We must, as Catholics, face this teaching squarely and honestly; it is a possibility for each of us, but only if we forsake God utterly by giving ourselves utterly to self-apart-from-God. We must not run away from this, or try to forget it and the danger of it; or laugh it out of court, as the world around us does, in which the devil has become a joke. Father Martin D'Arcy, S.J., has said that the doctrine of hell and the fire of hell is the most unpopular and most misunderstood of the Church's teachings on the after life.<sup>3</sup> Our world has rejected this doctrine wholesale, and in consequence the atmosphere around us is entirely obnoxious to it. Christ could not have spoken more plainly and decisively about it. Yet even where his authority is acknowledged, and God is still believed in, the conception of what God is becomes increasingly an idolatry; the projection upon him of the uncurbed wishful thinking of the human mind, which will make for itself a more comfortable god to worship, a god in its own image. We may well be thankful that the Church, because it is divinely guided and will not surrender to the false spirit of any age, has always tenaciously maintained this doctrine. Belief in hell is a salutary balancing element in our religion. It prevents us, as without it we easily may, from falling into sentimentality in our conception of God's love for us in redemption.

The Cross of Christ is a hard teaching; it is, and always has been, a stumbling block to many. But hell shows us why the

<sup>3</sup> *Death and Life* (Longmans, 1942) page 128.

price of our salvation was fixed by God our Father at so high a rate; it keeps the real and terrible nature of sin before our eyes. It reminds us, when in his love God gives us a heavy cross to carry after his Son, that this cross is a small price to pay in comparison with the debt of sin; a small price by which to gain safety from hell. There was a time when the doctrine of hell occupied too prominent a place, perhaps, in Catholic pulpits because it was often preached in terms which overlaid God's love for us by fear of him. That time has passed, and we are now in danger of hearing too little of God's judgment upon sin. The truth of hell should always be thought of and preached in the context of God's love, for hell is inevitable apart from his loving acts in redemption. It is Catholic doctrine that retribution is a real property even of human justice, but that our limited and fallible sentences should be of a mixed character, both curative and vindicative. But to God belongs the supreme power of exercising a justice that is wholly and finally retributive. Today we have gone far to domesticate God, and men, even in acknowledging his existence, are prepared to deny to him this supreme power of vindicating his infinite majesty. This denial has been perhaps, more than anything else, the cause of the almost total disappearance of belief in hell.

Towards the end of the first half of the last century, when the first steps towards this denial were being taken, they were made by devout believers such as F. D. Maurice, unguided by the firm teaching of the Catholic Church, but imbued with a deep reverence for our Lord's words, the teaching of the Scriptures and the tradition of past ages. They started by calling in question tentatively and with much hesitation, current teaching in the Church of England and the Free Churches concerning the nature of everlasting punishment. Maurice regarded universalism as too easy a solution, taking too little account of the weight of sin. Some words of his written in 1849 show nevertheless how crude was the background of thought against which the traditional position was currently held. He speaks of reaching the conclusion after much hesitation that the word *aionios*, translated 'eternal' or 'everlasting' in the gospels, did not mean endless temporal succession. 'Eternal' and 'temporal' must be distinguished. Eternal life is to know the love of God; not to know it is death. Eternal punishment, whatever else it means cannot mean



never-ending torments. For the rest he refused to dogmatize.<sup>4</sup> Maurice and his contemporaries were much influenced in these doubts and hesitations by theories of the Atonement that appeared to them to make of God an arbitrary tyrant. Such theories were partial and one-sided explanations of a revealed truth, some puzzles in which can be penetrated under grace by prayer and thought, though the ultimate mystery contained in it will always be beyond the full grasp of human understanding. But once these questions had been raised, since with these men the voice of the Catholic Church was not decisive, belief in eternal punishment was pushed more and more into the background. By 1874 the famous Congregationalist preacher and theologian Dr R. W. Dale was able to write of his own co-religionists: 'The doctrine of our forefathers has been silently relegated, with or without serious consideration, to that province of the intellect which is the house of beliefs which we have not rejected, but which we are willing to forget.'<sup>5</sup> That might not unjustly be held to describe the attitude of not a few Catholics today, and it is to our loss that it is so.



## THOSE THAT LIE IN THE SLEEP OF PEACE

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WHEN, in the Mass, we pray for the dead we speak of them as 'sleeping in the sleep of peace'. There seems to be an echo here of our Lord's words, 'The maid is not dead but sleepeth', and again of his use of the same verb when speaking of Lazarus. Chrysostom suggests that he is telling his followers not to be afraid of death; and perhaps he is contrasting two very different ideas of the after-life: the grey, wraith-like half-existence of Sheol or Hades with the christian idea of fulfilment, glory, peace. Certainly nowadays we need to be taught not

<sup>4</sup> *Belief and Unbelief Since 1850*. H. G. Wood (Cambridge, 1955), page 30. For a very interesting letter discussing this matter written in 1849 by F. J. A. Hort to Frederick Maurice see *The Life and Letters of Fenton J. A. Hort*, vol. I, page 116. (Macmillan).

<sup>5</sup> *Life of R. W. Dale*, by A. W. Dale (Hodder and Stoughton, 1894), p. 312.