

21C 2022

Today's readings deal with wealth and Hell, two topics that make people the most uncomfortable.

Hell is actually a fascinating and complicated subject.

Some speak as if the Bible presents a clear concept of Hell, but in reality, three different words in the Bible are sometimes translated as Hell, a forced consistency that conceals how the theology of the afterlife differs throughout the Bible.

Beginning in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word sometimes rendered as hell is Sheol. Other translations render it as Hades or leave it as Sheol (as does the New Revised Standard Version that we use in liturgy).

Even the understanding of Sheol differs throughout the Old Testament.

Some use it to mean an area where all souls go in order to sleep.

Other uses of Sheol suggest that some residents experience punishment or purgation.

Sheol is never presented, however, as a place of fiery judgment for sinners alone.

Until Isaiah stated that the righteous will resurrect, death was considered permanent and all the dead inhabited the same realm.

In the New Testament, the Greek word Gehenna is also sometimes translated as Hell.

It is the name of a valley near Jerusalem that was associated with the Canaanite sacrifice of children by fire.

Some have held that the area was a burning trash heap.

To be cast out of the city into Gehenna was considered a terrible fate.

Matthew uses “Gehenna,” but to what extent he uses it literally, as a kind of banishment from the city, and to what extent he means it metaphorically, for what happens after death, is not always clear.

Luke, on the other hand, uses the word Hades, translated as Hell in today’s passage, but not often.

The translation of these three terms, Sheol, Gehenna, and Hades as Hell therefore falsely suggests theological consistency.

The understanding of the afterlife develops throughout the Bible and beyond.

The medieval notion of a lake of fire where souls judged to be insufficient spend eternity is a compilation, a blending of aspects of all three terms, perhaps because people assumed they all referred to the same thing, but this ignores their differences.

Then what does Jesus say about the afterlife?

In Luke today, the rich man finds himself in Hades, where he is being tortured by fire.

Here we see echos of Gehenna, the area where babies and perhaps trash were burned, along with a sense of permanence, as in Sheol.

We know the man was very rich because he was accustomed to wearing purple.

You might recall that purple dye was worth many times its weight in gold.

In life, the rich man had consistently ignored a particular poor man at his gate.

(Notice that the rich man is not given a name, but we know the poor man as an individual, as Lazarus.

This allows us more easily to imagine ourselves as the nameless rich man while simultaneously emphasizing the dignity of the poor man.)

When they both die, Jesus says that the poor man goes to Abraham.

From Hades, the rich man can see Lazarus.

He asks Abraham to send Lazarus to him to bring him water.

Abraham has no desire to remove Lazarus from his position of comfort and adds that, even if he had, no one can cross the barrier in either direction.

The rich man is thus doubly rejected.

This story is troubling to some because it seems to offer no hope.

The rich man appears to have no chance of redemption.

Some Christians do, in fact, read it this way and, assuming a vision of Hell not found in the Bible, argue that, if we are not right with God in this world, we will suffer for eternity in fire in the next.

It is impossible, however, to reconcile this depiction of God with our understanding that God, who is love, is in all of us.

It would be a sadistic and self-hating God, not the God in whom we trust, the God whom today's collect describes as declaring God's "almighty power chiefly in showing mercy and pity."

The metaphors he used have been driven in directions inconsistent with the gospel.

As Martin Luther King explained, "We must not take this story as a theology of the after life. It is not a Baedeker's guide to the next world."¹

We should be cautious, King continues.

"There is always the danger that we will transform mythology into theology. . . . He who seeks to describe the furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell is taking the mystery out of religion and incarcerating it in the walls of an illogical logic."²

What is clear is that Jesus envisions some sort of afterlife reckoning, some sort of exclusion of those who are self-centered, but he does not describe it in detail.

If we look closely at the story, we see why the rich man is unable to leave his unpleasant situation.

He has not changed.

1 <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/impassable-gulf-parable-dives-and-lazarus-sermon-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

2 <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/impassable-gulf-parable-dives-and-lazarus-sermon-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

He still feels superior to Lazarus and thinks that Lazarus should be made to leave his place of comfort, should give up his comfort, in order to bring comfort to the rich man.

The rich man continues to see Lazarus, in other words, as someone who's needs are unimportant, or at least less important than his own.

This reminds me of the person who once justified his greed by telling me that he simply had more needs than I did.

I wondered how he was able to make such an accurate assessment of my needs.

Anyway, until the rich man repents, changes his way of being and embraces love, he remains separate from God, and none of those outside Hades are able to circumvent this process.

Jesus is warning us against the self-centeredness of the rich man that keeps him locked away from others.

As King writes, his “sin was not his wealth; his wealth was his opportunity.”³

In fact, as King points out, Abraham in whose bosom Lazarus rests was one of the richest men of his day.⁴

3 <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/impassable-gulf-parable-dives-and-lazarus-sermon-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

4 <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/impassable-gulf-parable-dives-and-lazarus-sermon-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

Jesus also does not accuse the rich man of actively abusing people or of achieving ill-gotten wealth.

The rich man simply was so caught up within himself that he was unable to see Lazarus, unable to recognize him as his brother, as one equally worthy of God's love.

He had, as King explains, taken “the ‘isness’ of circumstantial accidents and transformed them into the ‘oughtness’ of a universal structure.”⁵

We, too, are often guilty of thinking that the way things are is the way things ought to be.

God does not see it this way.

We are all part of God, all important to God, all loved by God.

If we continue to struggle against our profound connectedness, then we struggle against God, against ourselves, who are partial incarnations of God, and prevent ourselves from rejoining God.

Christ's warning is sharp—comfort can become a trap.

As Paul explains, the love of money is a root of all evil.

This was mistranslated in the King James version, however, as “*the* root of all evil,” which led people to believe that money itself was evil.

It was not such a great leap from there to think that God prefers us to be in poverty.

5 <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/impassable-gulf-parable-dives-and-lazarus-sermon-dexter-avenue-baptist-church>

Many Christians have, in fact, demonized wealth and romanticized poverty as a way of being closer to God.

The poor in this narrative are the “sweet, simple children of God.”

This ironically allows us to ignore their suffering, just as the rich man did.

Christ is telling us a different story.

In actuality, having wealth may or may not lead to evil, as Paul makes clear in his letter to Timothy.

“As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”

God’s riches are found in relationship.

They are love, integrity, humility, grace, compassion, generosity.

We become distracted from them by the things wealth can provide, convinced even of our superiority and unconcerned about others while we relish our own comfort.

It is not that God wants us to be miserable.

It is merely that, when we have the ability to live in great comfort, we tend to forget others, to convince ourselves that we deserve what we have because we have

worked hard and assume that others deserve less because they did not work as hard, or they have fewer needs, or their needs matter less.

God does not believe that some of us are more valuable or important than others.

God made us all for a purpose, loves us all, invites all of us to love God back and to love and rejoice in one another.

When we do, we find ourselves in the presence of God.