

Advent Theme: Heaven and Hell

On Fridays this month we have been considering the traditional themes of Advent, the Four Last things: death, judgement, heaven and hell – and their relevance to peace and reconciliation. Today we turn to heaven and hell.

It is easy for our ideas of heaven and hell to be influenced by those medieval pictorial representations that were often painted on the chancel arch of churches. On one side are the righteous men and women going to a beautiful place, and on the other side are the wicked going to a place of fire and torment populated by ugly demons. And often clergy and monks were shown on that side. Whoever we are we cannot escape the judgement to come.

I imagine we do not see heaven and hell in those terms nowadays, and we probably do not even understand them as places. Yet the idea of facing the consequences of our actions in life when we die is a real one to be taken seriously. What exactly will happen when we die we simply do not know. That is in God's hands. He is the judge. Yet we hope and trust in his love and mercy.

Although the idea of hell as a future place of torment is a difficult, even unacceptable one for the modern mind, the idea of hell on earth is a very real one for many people. For us in the comfortable West life in war-torn places like Syria is unimaginable. The constant fear of injury or death, the fear and desperation, the sheer grimness of the physical conditions and quite beyond our own experience. We are rightly appalled by the terrible event in Berlin this week. Yet people in Syria and elsewhere suffer such atrocities on a daily basis.

When will it all end, we may well ask. Yet Advent is a time not for resignation or despair but for hope. We are approaching the great feast of the incarnation, of God coming into the world in the form of a vulnerable baby, a sign of his solidarity with our fallen world and our fallen human nature. It is for that message of hope that I chose as our reading the opening verses of the penultimate chapter of the book of Revelation (Revelation 21.1-5).

The Bible begins with an account of the creation of all things. It ends here with a vision of a new creation, of a new heaven and a new earth. This will be a new form of existence in which death will be no more, and crying and pain will be no more. That is the daily prayer of people in Syria and elsewhere. That should be our prayer for them and for the whole of God's creation.

For we believe that despite all the signs to the contrary in our world good will triumph over evil, true peace will conquer war and conflict, love will overcome hatred and enmity.

23 December 2016
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