

The Cross Conquers Hell (Mark 9:38-50)

A Sermon for the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost

The gospel text, Mark 9:38-50, warns of hell. Hell is mentioned three times. In the footnotes it points out that two verses were omitted because they say the same thing. So in this gospel text five times it talks about hell. The word used here is "*Gehenna*," which is what we normally mean by "hell." It isn't the word, "Hades," which can mean "death." Moreover,

- "The unquenchable fire" is mentioned in Matthew 5:29-30, 13:30, 18:8-9.
- "The outer darkness" is mentioned in Matthew 8:12, 22:13, and 25:50.
- "Weeping and gnashing of teeth" is mentioned in Matthew 13:50, Revelation 9:2, and 21:18.

Among us today it is widely considered bad taste to talk about hell. You just don't mention it unless in cursing or telling jokes. It's impolite. If you do talk about hell, people will say: "You're a fundamentalist. You're backward. You're superstitious."

What basically happens is that we pretend that hell, like death, is not something we have to bother with. We try not to think about it. We think that if we don't think about it, then it magically is not a problem, which is one way we deny and fool ourselves.

There are religious ideas of hell elsewhere. Back in the Fourteenth Century, Dante wrote his epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*. In the first part, *Inferno*, hell is depicted as nine concentric circles of torment going down to the center of the earth. One must go through hell in order to recognize and reject sin. Hell is about purging sin from oneself.

In Hinduism life is about rewards and punishments. In Hinduism if you are good, you go up the ladder. If you are bad, you go down the ladder. Karma will settle the score if you hurt others. The human task is to do more good than harm, even if that takes more than four hundred million years to escape Karma.

In the 1993 movie, *Groundhog Day*, weatherman Phil must live the same day, Groundhog Day, over and over until he makes the right choices. He had to go through hell, so to speak. Hell is living the same nightmare day over and over again until you get it right. A variation on this theme is found in a recent detective story in which a woman murders someone and goes to hell. Hell is that she has to repeat that day for ever and ever. Just like a broken record. Meaningless and caught.

For Jehovah's Witnesses, all those outside of their kingdom, are annihilated. For Mormons there is no hell, just degrees of heaven. It ends up that there is no real hell.

Someone has even said that if there is a hell, no one is in it.

Today tolerance is everything. A few years ago someone mockingly said: God is nice, we're nice, isn't that nice? Today we could transpose this into saying: God is tolerant, we are tolerant, isn't that tolerant?

The consequence of this kind of thinking is that if everything is tolerated, there is no meaning. It's all a charade. It's all a show.

This idea that it's all a charade isn't new. In fact, Abelard, the great Christian thinker who died in 1147, said the cross itself is a charade, a show. What the cross did, and that includes all that happened leading up to it and after it, is God that is showing: "You thought I was against you, but I really love you." It's just a charade demonstrating his love, rather than his wrath.

To say that everything is a charade, a show, exposes two huge questions: 1) The question of justice. Where do we sort out all the real injustices? Do we just say that nothing matters? That doesn't work. Then there is no meaning whatsoever. As Karl Popper, the famous mathematician and scientist said: If everything is true, nothing is true.

And 2) What about forever?

The basic problem is that **we think we decide**. We think that we are smart and able to choose from the cafeteria of options the world presents to us. But that is breaking the first commandment, and that is original sin.

We're not so different from the ancient Greek sophists. "Sophism" means "I am wise." We think that, too. One of the ancient Greek sophists, Protagoras, said: "Man is the measure of all things." Whatever individuals deem to be true for them is "Truth." Plato, of course, rejected Protagoras.

What do we say to all this? You will not be surprised to hear: The cross is the answer. Sin, death, and the devil are all one. Romans 6:23: "For the wages of sin is death." Hebrews 2:14: ". . . he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage."

Death is not a charade. The cross and resurrection are not a charade.

1 John 4:10: "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to give his life as a sacrifice for us (to be the expiation for our sins)." That's very serious. Or Luke 10:18: where Jesus says: "I saw Satan falling like lightning from heaven." Satan is conquered.

Or in Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13 about the temptation of Jesus by the devil: Jesus conquers him. Jesus overcomes him. That's what is happening also in all those times he heals those possessed by demons. This is a real battle; this is not a charade or a show.

The same is true for us. As Gerhard Forde points out: **The cross interprets us; we don't interpret the cross.** What does the cross say?

First, the cross says that the problem of sin is so serious that the only way it could be handled is by God himself.

Second, this is the way he handled it, and it's not something that we can interpret away.

Third, it's handled. "It is finished" (John 19:30).

What does one say about hell? What one says about hell is that for those who are in Christ Jesus, hell is like death and sin. The power of the devil has been taken care of. Christ did it for us. That is the great message and comfort of the Gospel, the Good News, that in him we have freedom and life. We are in him forever, and that equals heaven. Amen