

Hell ain't what it used to be

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Lots of conservative and fundamentalist Christians believe that if you don't accept Jesus as your personal Lord and Saviour, you're going to go to hell. They almost seem to relish speaking about eternal conscious torment as God's punishment for being rejected.

I profoundly disagree. This way of thinking about Christian faith is based in fear which says more about the person thinking this way than it ever says about the Christian understanding of God.

The other deep problem with this understanding is that it treats Christianity as if the primary purpose of faith is to determine where you end up after you die. All you need to do is "accept Jesus as Saviour" and you're good to go. This way of thinking profoundly diminishes the way we live on earth, the way we live in relationship with other people and all creatures, the way we treat the environment, the way we live faithfully or unfaithfully.

Obviously, I disagree. As I've said many times before in these columns, Christian faith is not about the afterlife. Jesus teaches us the Great Commandment, to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbours as ourselves, as a profoundly this-worldly way of being. For Jesus, how we live here and now is the heart of faith. To treat life as an entrance exam for heaven or hell is deeply unfaithful to Jesus' own vision.

Indeed, I'd go so far as to say that hell is not a particularly Biblical concept at all. Neither the Old nor the New Testament mention hell as a place of eternal punishment. It is found in the writings of early Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans. Plato, for example, discusses the concept of 'hell' in his dialogue "Gorgias", where he speaks of eternal punishment. The early church in Rome embraced this Greek philosophical concept in the early years of the history of the church, when it was fighting for its life.

So let's explore the concept a little bit.

The Bible never uses the word "hell" understood in that way. Rather, it uses four different words which are all translated by this same word in English.

In the Old Testament, "Sheol" is a nebulous, ethereal realm. Most importantly, it is a neutral place that was thought to lie beneath the surface of the earth. That makes sense when we remember that the ancients thought of the earth as a flat plain covered by the dome of the sky. Sheol was simply the grave or the pit where the dead rested or slept.

The New Testament uses three different words for this concept.

The first word is "tartarus" which only occurs once in 2 Peter 2:4 to describe a place of darkness where the rebellious angels were chained and reserved for judgment. No eternal punishment there; it was a 'holding cell', if you will.

"Hades" is used 11 times as the direct equivalent of Sheol. This Greek word describes a grave or a pit. In Greek mythology, Hades was the underworld or "the place for departed spirits," but that is not the New Testament understanding of this word.

The most common word is "Gehenna." It is used 12 times, all but one of them in the gospels. Gehenna takes its name from a valley located just outside Jerusalem called the valley of Hinnom. During Jesus' life, this valley was used as the city dump. A fire was constantly kept alight there to burn up and consume all of the city's unwanted rubbish.

On a literal level, Gehenna was a place of cleansing and purification. All the unwanted garbage was consumed as a way of keeping the city cleaner.

So often, however, the gospels use this image as a metaphor. Like the image of a camel trying to squeeze through the eye of a needle, Jesus uses hyperbole to make his point. For Jesus, Gehenna becomes a teaching tool to help motivate people to do right in this life. Jesus uses it as a metaphorical 'stick'. In the same way as the garbage fire kept the city clean, so God would use metaphorical fire to clean up our lives.

It's important to remember, however, that the gospels only use "Gehenna" 11 times. Jesus rarely spoke about the 'stick' and spent far more time offering the 'carrot.' For Jesus, the kingdom of God is what earth looks like when we live with compassion, justice, grace, and love. We are citizens of the kingdom of God not after we die, but as we live in godly ways on earth. We reach out in love to embrace all people with God's radical inclusiveness and welcome.

Jesus never tries to guilt us or beat us into the kingdom of God through fear. It is always an invitation, a gracious welcoming into a new way of living with compassion, grace, and love.

As a result, I don't follow Jesus in order to go to heaven when I die. Conversely, I don't follow Jesus to avoid going to hell. That's much too small a vision. It's a cheap form of faith that is really nothing more than eternal fire insurance.

Do I believe in hell? Certainly. But I suspect that the only hells that exist are the ones that we create and allow to exist. Too often, we make "hell on earth."

But that's not the gospel. The gospel is that we are invited to follow Jesus here and now so that we might experience wholeness and grace, compassion and peace, goodness and love. These are the gifts given to us as we give ourselves away in love for the service of all people and all creatures.

I believe that we are called to live as the people God created us to be here and now. This is what the gospel of John calls "abundant or eternal life". For me, that's the whole purpose and *raison d'être* of being a Christian.