

Is There Anyone in Hell?

Is there anyone in hell? Perhaps it is not the first thing one thinks of when reading today's scriptures, but it did occur to me because of the message of the first reading from the Book of Wisdom:

Yet you [God] are merciful to all, because you can do all things
and overlook men's sins so that they can repent.

Yes, you love all that exists, you hold nothing of what you have made in abhorrence,
for had you hated anything, you would not have formed it.

This lovely reading is one of the strongest statements in the Old Testament about the infinite love and unfathomable mercy of God. Now we tend to think of God in the Old Testament as being a God who gets angry and smites people who step out of line, thinking nothing of destroying whole communities of people who act sinfully and won't repent, as with Sodom and Gomorrah. But this text tells a different story and by the time the Book of Wisdom was written, about a century before Jesus appeared, it seems that God's people had begun to get a deeper insight into the nature of God: not so much a God of justice, seeking redress in his righteous anger, much more a God of mercy, slow to anger, abounding in love and quick to forgive. This is so much more like the God that Jesus reveals to us.

Here, towards the end of the Old Testament period, we have a God who far from destroying the sinner is merciful towards him and ready to 'overlook men's sins so that they can repent'. This is such a consoling message. Again and again the Book of Wisdom makes much of God's forbearance, that sinners may have every chance to repent. This, indeed, is the message of the story of Zachaeus in the Gospel: Jesus only needed to call his name, and he repents wholeheartedly of all his past wrongdoing and pledges to make amends over and above what is due. It's quite clear that God wants all people to be saved. As the Book of Wisdom again says: *'Yes, you love all that exists, you hold nothing of what you have made in abhorrence, for had you hated anything, you would not have formed it'*.

This presents us with a problem, for if God is all forgiving and can hate nothing that he has created, this suggests he is ready to forgive everyone everything. So, then, where is the need for hell? Indeed, is there a hell at all and, if so, is there anyone in it? There are many references to hell in the Scriptures and Jesus speaks of it often as the destiny of those who, by their sinful and selfish actions, show they reject God or hate or harm their neighbour, so hell must be a possibility, but is there anyone in it? This is something impossible for us to know, but the difference between Sodom and Gomorrah, on the one hand, and Nineveh on the other is that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because the people would not repent whereas Nineveh was saved from being destroyed for its sinful behaviour because all its people repented when God gave

them the chance. Similarly, the saving grace for Zachaeus is his impressive and wholehearted desire to repent and make amends.

I often think the concept of hell more than anything satisfies our need for revenge and just punishment on those who commit the most hateful and abhorrent crimes. We find it hard to accept that Adolf Hitler or the Yorkshire Ripper or Ian Brady and Myra Hindley might not, in some tribunal beyond this earth, get the fullness of the punishment in our eyes they deserve, but who are we to judge? We cannot see into another's soul as God does, and we cannot know another's conscience, and, most of all, we cannot fathom the infinite depths of God's mercy. All we can do is be grateful that he looks upon *us* with eyes of compassion, that, with *us*, he is slow to anger, rich in mercy and abounding in love.