

### Love or Fear, Heaven or Hell?

So, has it been hot enough for you this week? I could make one of those preacher jokes you read on the internet about a hotter place, but I don't think I will. I've never thought fear, even fear of hell, to be a good motivator. Fear twists and deforms the person who is fearful, limiting their life, rather than enlarging it. Love, on the other hand, invites the candidate into a larger and larger life. It, too, remakes the personality but in a creative, beautiful sense that leads the person to even greater joy. That is why God tries Her best to motivate us with love of Himself and love of our neighbor and love of our self, rather than fear of hell. Love is so much more powerful than fear. And love is eternal, whereas fear (thank God!) eventually ceases.

All by way of saying that the Gospel of Jesus Christ invites us with love rather than threatens us with fear. Jesus, the supreme realist, talks of a hellish state of soul where the person is turned in upon himself and indifferent to the reality and presence of others, including the Ultimate Other, God. God, Ultimate Gentleman or Ultimate Lady that He is, will not force a human soul to something even as lovely as salvation. So there is the real possibility of an eternal turning in upon oneself, an eternal refusal of the divine invitation to join the party of the rest of creation. That eternal separateness is hell, cut off from God and from every one else, and it is a fearful, painful state of soul, both here and hereafter.

But the way you hear some Christians talk about God and human life you would think that God has made the human race just to see how many He can catch in sin and lock up forever in hellish torture, how many souls God can dangle by a slim thread over the yawning pit of hell. There are, of course, the lucky few that escape and manage to scrape into heaven, but they are the exception. And when some Christians talk about this sort of thing, one has the feeling that they are disappointed that even these few escape everlasting punishment (all except themselves, of course).

Now contrast that attitude with orthodox Christian teaching. God, who is supremely happy within Him/Herself, who does not need anything outside of Himself to be happy, loved the possibilities in Her mind of what we know as creation, the universe, or maybe many universes. So, out of love for what could be, God created – set off the Big Bang, or whatever wonderful, energy that evolved eventually into sun, moon, and stars, Andromeda and Jupiter, aardvarks and zebras, Andrea and Zebedee. And God was so infatuated with this creation that He arranged for some of it to escape its inevitable running down, the ultimate death of universal entropy at the end of time. This is what the theologians call heaven, the kingdom of God, salvation. The words don't matter, but the concept does. Some parts of a beautiful, glorious reality escape the inevitable running down of the universe's batteries.

So the second crucial question (after the first one is answered, that is, that God cares enough, is infatuated enough, to save for eternity) – the second crucial question is who or what gets to escape the universal death of entropy, the running down of things? Who or what gets to be with God forever? Traditional Christian thought has answered human persons and angelic persons. I'm also plumping for dogs, cats, turtles, polar bears, pandas, butterflies, roses, redwoods, agates, carnelians, whatever. I'm hoping that every kind of creature is transformed into an eternal, what-Saint-Paul-calls-spiritual, reality. That is, our essential and complete identity is preserved and enhanced, to be with God forever. And all because of love, because of God's infinite infatuation with us, Her creation.

The next part of this issue is what percentage of the possible candidates gets to be eternal? Only a few, or lots, or all? Twisted Christian thought says only a few and even they have to work hard at becoming worthy, usually giving up anything that is beautiful and pleasing. Orthodox Christian thinking, relying on the expression of that incredible love that began the creation, says all, or virtually all, persons get to be with God forever. The mechanism for this is not the efforts of those who are candidates for eternity but rather the love and determination of God. God *wants* us to be with Her; all we have to do is trust that desire, trust God – what the Church calls faith. We get to be with God forever, not by being good, but by being trusting. And the evidence for that trust is the simple fact that we are, that we exist, when we didn't have to. Creation itself is an incredibly powerful sign of God's love. (By the way, being and acting good is not irrelevant, as goodness reinforces the power of trust, as well as helping to create the world that God wants. Goodness doesn't get us into heaven, but it sure reassures us that God is on our side, thus releasing wonderful, creative energies in ourselves for God's purposes.)

But there is even more, the mysterious event and reality we call Jesus Christ. In this human being, the Church sees God continuing God's creative energies. God inserts Himself into Her creation in a particularly focused fashion that continues and transforms the original creative energies. In Jesus Christ, the universal, salvific energies of God become particular in a way that we can know and love. And through this particularity, we are taken up into God's universalism. Neat, huh?

Now I have to admit something to you. This is not the sermon I set out to compose. But I started early in the week with a throwaway line about the heat and ended up with this meditation on heaven and hell, hate and love, not even on today's scripture readings. Just goes to show you that you can never tell where you will end up when a theologian begins to cogitate about something even as common as the weather. Thank God for the moderating effects of oceans and swimming pools and air conditioning. Do you suppose that these are all signs of God's love?

In closing, let us pray for those who shall choose a rector for this parish: Almighty God, giver of every good gift: Look graciously on your Church, and so guide the minds of those who shall choose a rector for this parish, that we may receive a faithful pastor, who

will care for your people and equip us for our ministries, through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.