

Sermon on Sunday 29 September 2024

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Mark 9 v 47: And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell.

The weather has turned cold this week, so maybe it's the right Sunday for a sermon on the fires of Hell! There are preachers who talk a lot of rubbish about Hell. Some would say that talking rubbish comes naturally to preachers anyway. And I'm certainly going to talk rubbish this morning.

Over the centuries, the Church has allowed some very unfortunate misconceptions about Hell to get hold of our imaginations. The art of painters like Hieronymus Bosch and Peter van Breughel show Hell as a flaming subterranean torture chamber where Satan torments the wicked for eternity.

But when Jesus talks about hell in Mark's Gospel, it's a bit more banal than that. The word he uses in his own language is Gehenna. You can all go to Gehenna if you like. Literally. It's on Google Maps. It's a deep valley or ravine just outside the old walls of Jerusalem, the Valley of Hinnom in modern Hebrew. It's rather pretty suburban parkland now, overlooked by the old city walls around the Gate of Joppa. But in Jesus' time, and for centuries before, Gehenna was the city rubbish dump, the municipal landfill site. I told you I was going to talk rubbish this morning!

Gehanna is outside the city wall. You don't want your smelly, rotting rubbish inside the city, do you? Throw it over the wall. Like most places where organic waste is piled up in large quantities, it would constantly catch fire and burn in a slow, smouldering, smoky way. Was that the inspiration for the everlasting flames of hell? And, of course, wherever you have organic waste – whose got a compost bin in their garden? – you'll get worms!

When we know all this, Jesus' rather gruesome image about cutting off a foot or tearing out an eye and throwing it away, suddenly makes a lot more sense. Throw your eyeball on the rubbish tip, it's better than all of you landing on the rubbish tip. I think Jesus might even have got a laugh for this line!

So, this passage isn't about sending people to Hell. It's about the Kingdom of God, the place that Jesus wants to lead us to. The place that is so amazingly good that it is worth almost any sacrifice, any radical act to get onto the right side of the wall, the right side of the frontier. Would you give your right arm – or your right eye – to get there?

We hear each week the stories of countless thousands of desperate people who make their way to the frontiers and coastlines of Europe and the USA each week. People who make unimaginable sacrifices for their hopes of a life of greater security or prosperity.

How much would we sacrifice to secure our citizenship in the Kingdom of God? It's not a Kingdom with clear geographical boundaries. There are no walls or fences defining its borders – though, sadly, there are some Christians who seem to think

there ought to be. It's any place and any time where God is acknowledged as King, where God's rule, God's wise and loving laws, are recognised and lived out. Who wouldn't want to go there?

Let us imagine ourselves as eager, impatient immigrants heading for the Kingdom of God. We've got our Visa – Jesus himself has sorted that – and we're through passport control; but ... there are still a few formalities to attend to at the frontier There is no customs union between Gehenna and the Kingdom of God, and there are a few things you can't bring with you. Things that have no place in the Kingdom of God. And if you want that better life, you're going to have to leave them behind. If you want to cross over, throw them in the rubbish bin over there. Not because of some arbitrary law of the divine immigration office, but because you can't live the life of a citizen of the Kingdom of God until you've got rid of them.

And there's no compromise. You can't offer to pay more for excess baggage, you can't offer to pay duty on it. Leave it behind, throw it in the rubbish.

Greed. Prejudice. Pride. Lust. Dishonesty. Privilege. Indifference. Bitterness and anger. Unrepented and unresolved conflicts. Unforgiven injuries.

There's no room in the Kingdom of God for any of these. And I know that giving such things up is seriously hard. For many of us, these burdens have taken deep root in our identities. They feel like part of who we are. Maybe it is not too great an exaggeration to speak of cutting off your hand.

What might you need to cut off and throw in the bin?

Whatever has no place in the Kingdom of God, is rubbish. But it doesn't have to hold you back. It belongs on the tip - outside the walls. Let it burn away there. You don't want it. This is not an image of punishment, it is an image of liberation.

I wonder what Jesus would say about rubbish today, 2,000 years on? I think he'd take a rather different, and perhaps more cheerful, approach.

We're not supposed to throw things on the rubbish tip anymore, are we. Especially not organic waste – like hands and feet and eyes. Our local authorities try very hard to reduce the amount of stuff we throw into landfill sites. They fill our gardens with multicoloured bins and tell us to sort our rubbish out. Because so much of it can be recycled – refurbished, reprocessed, and used again in new and different ways.

Organic waste – is turned to compost. Those worms again! Nutrients for new growth, for new life. Other waste streams go to power stations and bring heat and light to our homes. New power from old rubbish.

I think Jesus would have liked those ideas. Don't let your life end up on the rubbish tip. Recycle it. Let God make it new, transform it, make it ready to use again, in different and surprising ways. New life, new power. But above all, a creation fit and ready to live as a citizen of the Kingdom of God.