

So, the question I'd like to explore with you this morning is will the human story, will *history*, have a happy ending? Was Julian of Norwich – who I'm ashamed to admit I only discovered was a *woman* relatively recently – was *she* correct when she famously said 'All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well' or was Macbeth more on the money with his nihilistic observation that life is 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying *nothing*...'??

Well, it seems to me that a Christian (or *anyone* who believes in God) can only really say the former and for the first seven verses of our second reading it seemed that the author of Revelation agreed with me. It's a beautiful vision of the fulfilment of God's redemptive plan: a new heaven and a new earth in which there's no more death, no more mourning or pain of any kind because God Himself has wiped every tear from every eye.

That passage is often read at funerals but clearly we always stop before verse 8 because it then turns into some sort of horror movie with hundreds of people being thrown into a lake of fire. Which is not so comforting for the grieving relatives. Especially if their loved ones weren't committed *Christians* – as probably most of the people I bury *aren't* – because one of the many categories of people who end up in the lake of fire is 'the faithless'. Which seems a bit harsh to me. As does sending the *cowardly* there. I mean, haven't they suffered enough already?!

And actually John's list reminds me a bit of that old Rowan Atkinson sketch in which the devil is welcoming the new arrivals into hell. And he says 'Murderers? Over there on the right please. Thieves can you join them. The French...? Great if you can just join the Germans there at the front... And atheists...? Well, I bet *you're* feeling a bit stupid, aren't you...?

But returning to the faithless, does not believing in God really warrant eternal torment? Which is what we've been told the lake of fire involves in the previous chapter. And to be honest, eternal torment seems somewhat disproportionate even for *murderers*. You know, what happened to an eye for an eye? Which, let's remember, was not an *encouragement* to seek revenge but (completely the opposite) an appeal to *limit* your retribution to what was done to you and no more in order to prevent a never-ending and permanently-escalating cycle of violence. So, how could an *infinite* punishment for *any* finite crime ever be just?

And of course *Jesus* encouraged us to forgive our enemies, to forsake vengeance altogether, so isn't it a bit odd to suggest that *God* won't do the same? Does God not practice what he preaches...?

Well, sadly most Christians throughout history and probably the majority still today effectively believe that he *doesn't* in that they're happy – or at least *willing* – to accept that some portion of the human race will spend eternity in hell, an idea which is based on this verse and a few others like it and to bring this back to our *original* question

(Does the human story have a happy ending or not?) if hell exists then the answer is surely no – at least, not for everyone. Clearly it's anything *but* happy for anyone in the various categories that John listed, the murderers, the sorcerers and all liars.

Now I'm assuming that the first two of those don't apply to any of us. Although I'm not really sure what a 'sorcerer' is. Would that include *anyone* who occasionally reads their horoscope...?

But if all *liars* are damned too, well, that might be a bit closer to home. But how *regularly* do you have to lie in order to qualify as A Liar?

But even if *we're* all alright, we escape the 'second death', how could we really be *happy* in the new heaven and the new earth if we know that our friends and loved ones, possibly even our *spouses* or children are experiencing eternal torment in the lake of fire?

Now people have come up with various answers to that question over the years. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas wrote 'In order that the happiness of the saints may be more delightful to them and that they may render more copious thanks to God for it, they are allowed to see perfectly the sufferings of the damned.'

And 400 years later, the revivalist preacher Jonathan Edwards who would probably have written Thomas off as a godless Papist in general, agreed with him on this point and went even further, asking in a sermon 'Can the believing father in Heaven be happy with his

unbelieving children in Hell? To which his answer was ‘Yes, I tell you! Such will be his sense of justice that it will *increase* rather than diminish his bliss...

Well, I don’t know about you but that doesn’t really work for me. But then nor does the alternative suggestion that God will simply *erase* our unsaved loved ones from our memories. And an article on the Christian website crosswalk.com actually invokes both of our readings today to support that, to me, incredibly sinister claim.

So Isaiah 65 verse 17 which is the *original* biblical promise of a new heaven and a new earth *also* says ‘the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind’. And similarly verse 4 of Revelation 21 says that mourning will be no more because the first things have passed away and this article concludes from all of that that [quote] once ‘the New Creation is completed, all memory of [our unsaved relatives] will be gone. We won’t even know that they are missing...

Isn’t that monstrous?! It effectively turns god into a cosmic Stalinist and also seems rather ironic given that liars are one of the groups singled out for the lake of fire cos it displays a somewhat... flexible approach to Truth...

But I’ve heard the same from serious academics including one of my lecturers at theological college who’s now a Bishop. I won’t say where. But he made a similar point when grappling with the fact that in several places the Bible does *unequivocally* affirm that history will have a happy ending.

So, 1 Corinthians 15:28 and Ephesians 1:23 talk (respectively) of God and Christ being ‘all in all’ but, combining statements by John Stott (who was for many years the vicar of All Souls Langham place) and another theologian, Philip Hughes, ‘How God can in any meaningful sense be called “everything to everybody” if there is, eternally, a section or realm of creation that does not belong to this fullness and by its very presence contradicts it...?’

Well, my lecturer-now-Bishop’s response to that was to suggest that the *lake* of fire does what fire *normally* does i.e. *destroys* things or in this case people. So the punishment is eternal in its *effect* rather than in *duration* and this has the advantage of being more humane (in that it doesn’t involve a cosmic torture-chamber) and it means that God’s promise to be all in all is (kind of) fulfilled in that He can be in everyone who survived the purge! But again that seems rather Orwellian and not really compatible with a God who values *truth* let alone love and mercy...

So, is there a happy ending or not? Well, it seems to me that both Isaiah and John who wrote Revelation *want* to say ‘yes’ but can’t quite let go of the human (not divine) desire for vengeance, to see their enemies punished. Cos having painted that beautiful picture of the wolf and the lamb feeding together in chapter 65, Isaiah ends his prophecy with a gory fantasy about dead bodies and the very last line is ‘their worm shall not die, their flesh shall not be quenched’. So definitely *not* a happy ending...

But it seems to me that there *must* be a happy ending if God is truly God and if Jesus actually *achieved* what he came to do. We call him the savior of the world but how can that be the case if most of the world isn't saved and never will be?! And at the climax of the very section of 1 Corinthians where St Paul declares that God will be all in all he also asks 'Where, O death, is your victory?' Well, if, in fact, a significant percentage of the human race is going to end up experiencing the second death in the lake of fire, death can, quite plausibly reply 'Here! This is my victory!' But it seems pretty clear to me that Paul was asking a rhetorical question and that ultimately God's victory over sin and death and hell will be *total* and that *all* people, all *creation* will get to enjoy the benefits of his saving love.

I know that's different to what many Christians believe but an increasing number of us *do* embrace that more positive, more *coherent* view and it certainly seems more *relevant* at a time like this. Imagine saying to the families of people who've died of Covid 19 that their loved ones are in the lake of fire?! Obviously very few people would be so crass but if that's what you believe and you *don't* say it aren't you just being cowardly? And as we saw, cowardice is one of the things that can land you in the lake of fire! But clearly that whole way of looking at things is a counsel of despair and what the world needs now – and I would say at *any* time – is *hope*. To know that as Julian of Norwich said or rather as Jesus said to her in her vision 'All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well'.