

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Fear Hell

Jesus today tells us to fear, not the one who can destroy the body, but “the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell”. I know well what “the destruction of the body” means; but “the destruction of the soul” is a mysterious concept. We were told (by Sister Vianney) that you couldn’t destroy a soul. But she was obviously talking at cross purposes, as Jesus today is of an opposite persuasion. Perhaps the answer lies in the nature of eternity. We can only imagine “an endless succession of time”; but eternity isn’t that. Eternity is the opposite of time. Time cuts up into pieces: eternity unites. Time ticks out segments of life, and is lost; eternity gathers everything together, and saves.

Who Stands At The Gates Of Eternity?

When we leave the world of time and enter the eternal, there has to be a moment of judgement, and the old image of the book of judgement being opened, in which is recorded (= *saved*) every impulse of our life, doesn’t seem a bad one to me. I think that, because it is potentially our entry into God’s presence, the moment of death must be a kind of sacrament, and that means a moment when we meet Christ, who said *I shall return to take you with me*. So I think of Jesus standing at the gate, where the world of time in which we have always lived ends, and eternity begins for us. There we meet him.

Not One Shall Be Lost

We should imagine that, instead of the partial person who gets lost and marooned in time, the person who enters eternity carries *all* the meanings of a long life: the lost simplicity of the little child, the longings of the adolescent, the energy of youth, the labour of responsibility, the choices and divisions of maturity, the losses and depredations of age. I’m convinced that this takes no compression, or concertina-ing; all that freight is already with us, however often invisible or denied. The phrase of the Psalmist returns: *to you all flesh will come, with its burden of sin; too heavy for us, our offences: but you wash them away*. I think the moment of judgement must be the discernment - not only by the Lord, but by us - of the *ultimate* meaning of *all* our choices. Instead of a dispersed and incomprehensible series of judgements, our ultimate choice will stand revealed. The Last Judgment, The Whole Truth: the End, the

Purpose, the Plan of God, the Terminus, the Omega, the Fulfilment: it is accomplished.

Are You The One I Made?

I suppose we could say that good deeds are the ones which accept God’s gift of life with faith, hope, and love; sins are the deeds which turn down his gift out of fear, despair, or contempt. Few of our days, fewer of our deeds, seem worthy to bear such a verdict; yet, living only once, we are forming our attitude to the life we have been offered. The moment of death is an interface, at which all we have thought, or said, or done, or decided not to do, can be read as one, and judged as one. So although I accept the big book, I don’t think I understand the law-court setting. I’ve always thought that, when the moment comes, there will be no debate; I think *we will agree*, because we will know ourselves to be as we are judged to be. If we should be revealed as having chosen death instead of life, our choice will seem right to us, and we will not need a jailer to cuff us and take us away. And there the darkness falls again; because, just as I can’t envisage eternity as joy (it just turns into a sort of extended Tuscan lunch), so I can’t envisage eternity as death (it turns into that silly picture of devils boiling me in a pot). But the phrase of Jesus stands, which envisages God the Father as *the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell....* and the possibility is open for me to live my life so negatively, so meanly, that when God and I look at it whole, together, we shall agree that it is impermeable to redemption, a life which, in the use it made of its freedom, chose not to live. Now there *is* something to fear. I don’t need scaly standard dragons with horns when I have such a prospect to consider. And I believe it is a way of apprehending the truth of what Jesus says, and is something really worth fearing, which can be read as a positive principle about the way we should be living. Deuteronomy depicts Moses giving the same black-and-white moment of decision before the Hebrews: “Today I set before you death and disaster, or life and prosperity. Choose life then!”
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