

## A Holy Joke?!

*A sermon preached at St John's, Highbridge, by The Rev'd Martin Little, 26.9.21; Mark 9:38-end; Psalm 19:7-end.*

I want to begin my sermon today with a joke. It's quite a long joke, and the jury's out on whether it's particularly funny. But I hope my joke will help us as we think about some of the harshest words and hardest teaching that the New Testament gives us from the lips of Jesus. I hope it will help us to step back a little and gain some perspective on our faith. And as for the punchline... well, I'll leave you to decide if you think it works. Ok, here goes:

An Englishman, an Irishman and a Scotsman go into a pub. 'A pint, gentlemen?' says the Irishman. 'Aye, please', says the Scotsman, and nips off to the loo. 'Rather' says the Englishman. Sitting down at a corner table, he takes out a book, and begins to read.

'Whit's that ye're reading there?' says the Scotsman, returning and taking a seat next to him. 'It's the Bible' says the Englishman, as their friend arrives with the beer. 'Ah, the Good Book is it?' says the Irishman, sipping his Guinness. 'And what part of the Holy Scriptures is it today?'

'It's the Gospel of Mark' the Englishman replies. 'But it doesn't sound very good news to me. There's rather a lot of hellfire, and sin, and chopping off bits of one's body, what.'

'Hellfire you say?' says the Scotsman. 'We ken all about hell fire where I come fae. I wis brought up Presbyterian. It wisnae a good sermon unless it had a bit o' hellfire. We take our sin and punishment serious, you know. Nae pussyfooting about.'

'Oh, is that so?' says the Irishman. 'Well, I'm a cradle Catholic. Me mother took me to Mass twice a week. Catholics believe in the hellfire too, you know, but we don't go on about it as much as you Protestants. We know we can just go to confession, and get ourselves square with the Lord that way. What do you say about it?'

The Englishman, clutching his pint of London Pride, shifts uncomfortably in his seat. 'Well, you know, I'm Church of England, so... yes, well... nice weather for cricket isn't it?'

'Come on laddie!' says the Scotsman. 'Ye've been going to church every week o' yir life. Ye must have something to say about all this sin and damnation. Have ye never felt yersel' to be a miserable sinner? Have ye never felt the burning shame o' sin?'

(Englishman) 'Well, there was that time I borrowed my neighbour's edging shears without asking.'

(Scotsman) 'Come now, laddie! I'm talking about real sin - the kind that makes the hairs stand up on yir heid. Do you no' mind the immortal words o' Detective Jim Taggart? There's been a murrurdurrrr!'

The Irishman interrupts: 'Be at peace, my friend. That's not what the Lord Jesus is talking about at all. Look at what he says: he says if your hand causes you to sin, chop it off, and if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. Roving eyes and wandering hands? To be sure, I know what sin he's talking about!'

The Englishman finds his voice: 'Now, steady on chaps. How do can we possibly know what Jesus is talking about specifically? I mean, he lived so long ago. I'm sure we're just reading it out of context. And anyway we're not meant to take Jesus' words *literally*. We're not really meant to chop off our hands or gouge out our eyes! Heaven forbid, the mess would be ghastly!'

(Scotsman) 'No as ghastly as being cast intae the everlasting fires o' Hades!'

(Irishman) 'Calm yerself now. Ye're fit to blow a gasket! We Irish are great poets you know. I recognise a good metaphor when I see one. Yer man here's right. No-one's literally cutting off anything. It's a symbol for getting rid of those things in our lives, that, you know, aren't in the good Lord's will.'

(Scotsman) 'But hud yer horses, pal. If the 'cutting off' part isnae meant to be taken literally, then that might mean the hellfire bit isn't meant to be taken literally either! I'm no sure I'm on board wi' that.'

(Englishman) 'Well, personally I'm rather relieved. The Anglican God is a God of tolerance, fair play - that sort of thing. Sending someone to eternal punishment for a few little peccadilloes seems a bit off to me.'

(Scotsman) 'Ah, but it's no just a few wee things though is it? What about Adolf Hitler, or the chappie Bin Laden? Surely they should be punished for their sins? Hell's too good for them I say!'

(Irishman) 'Ah, but which of us can be the judge? It might be easy enough with those villains. But what about your average man or woman - someone who drinks a few too many, or takes a few bob out of the collection plate? Should they go to hell?'

(Englishman) 'We're still talking as if hell were literal place Surely it is a metaphor for something... seperation from God perhaps. Yes, that's it. Hell is what we end up with if we choose to reject God. It's not a petty punishment at all, but the tragic result of free will.'

(Scotsman) 'Humph. Sounds a bit namby-pamby to me. No-one's going to repent if you say that fae the pulpit! Who cares about rejecting a God they didnae believe in in the first place? And anyway: without punishment, how is justice going to be done?'

(Irishman) 'God isn't like that - he's more of a mystical force you know. You've just got to let go and let God.'

(Englishman) 'Well, one hates to stick one's neck out, but I'd say you're both wrong. God's no angry judge. Neither is he some mystical energy-field. I believe God is like Jesus: just like Jesus.'

(Scotsman) 'But Jesus wis angry! He's pretty angry here in your gospel o' Mark!'

(Irishman) 'No, Jesus was gentle, meek and mild - 'consider the lilies of the field' and all that... '

(Englishman) 'I don't know. I think I'm on the fence with that one: which is just where a good Anglican jolly well ought to be! Another round?'

The Englishman leaves his two friends still arguing and approaches the bar. There, huddled on a stool at the far end, is a shabby-looking little man. His face is the kind of face you'd forget as soon as you saw it - no distinguishing features. Yet as the Englishman places his order, he happens to catch the stranger's eye. There's something in the stranger's gaze that's unnerving - as if he would look right through you; yet his look is not unkind. 'What were you talking about with your friends?' says the shabby man, in an accent the Englishman can't quite trace.

'Oh, well, if you must know, we were talking about hell.'

'Hell?' the man replies, the faintest smile on his lips. 'Have you ever been there?'

'I beg your pardon... been to... don't be ridiculous!'

'I have' replies the man. 'A long time ago.' As he says this, the Englishman notices that one of the man's hands is missing, and that his foot has been amputated. He notices too, that part of the man's unnerving gaze stems from the fact that he appears to have one glass eye.

The Englishman notices that the man has started talking again. 'Yes, I've been to hell. It was a lonely place. Nobody there. Here, you must be thirsty. Theological debates dehydrate you, you know - and so does beer! Have a glass of water.'

'Oh, thanks very much' says the Englishman, accepting the glass and taking a sip.

But by the time he looks up from his drink, the man has vanished.

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So there's my joke. I wonder what you thought of it?

A passage like today's from Mark 9 unsettles us - and so it should. It forces us to ask difficult questions about the kind of lives we are living, and what the consequences might be. The three characters I gave you - the Englishman, Irishman, and Scotsman, represent three different approaches to these issues in the Christian tradition. The Irishman represents the mystical Catholic, the Scotsman the moralistic Presbyterian, and Englishman the middle-of-the-road Anglican. I wonder which approach struck a chord with you? It won't be much of a surprise to you that I identify most with the central position - though I think we need the others too.

But in the end, I want to try and point you to a way of looking at the passage that is less about us 'getting it right' and more about us drawing closer to God.

So, to the fourth man - the mysterious stranger, sitting by the bar. Who is the he? I'm sure you've worked it out by now, but the fourth man is Jesus himself. Jesus - especially in his cross and resurrection - is the punchline to all passages of Scripture.

When we read the passage with the cross and resurrection as the punchline, then we see something remarkable, and it's called the gospel. Try reading the passage again in the light of this and see what good news it becomes.

On the cross, it was not we who were punished, but Jesus. It was not we who were cut off, but Jesus. When he died on the cross, Jesus was cut off from his friends, his nation, his family - even from God himself, or so it seemed.

It was Jesus whose body was maimed, whose eyes were blinded by the darkness of Good Friday. It was Jesus who was cursed to die, drowned in death with the millstone of hatred and fear around his neck. And it was Jesus who, the tradition tells us, entered into hell and preached to the souls in torment - and who burst open the gates of that accursed place and led the redeemed to freedom. Hell is empty - *must be empty* - because Jesus has defeated it through his cross and resurrection. Only the perfect self-giving sacrifice of God himself could do such a thing. And he did it for us. To set us free. To remove all guilt and fear from our souls. To give our messy lives a purpose and a hope that sin and death cannot destroy: forgiveness for our sins, reconciliation with God, and eternal life with him.

You see, the reward that we receive from Jesus has nothing to do with our own righteousness - and everything to do with his. This beautiful free gift of the gospel - what we call 'grace' - is hidden in verse 41 of today's passage. Did you spot it? 'For truly I tell you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward.' That's why I had my stranger offer the Englishman a cup of water, and had the Englishman accept it. We are simply

to receive what is offered to those who bear the name of Christ. That living, refreshing water is Jesus's free gift all who trust in him. Simple as that.

So then, how is this good news for us here today? How does it lead to a better, more just world? Well, I believe that when ordinary woman and men like you and me put our trust in Jesus, we begin to change. We begin to choose those things that are actually God's will for us - not out of fear, but because we *want* to choose them. 'More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold'; says the Psalmist, 'sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.'

The fear of hell, then, might shock some people into realising their need of grace. That's maybe what Jesus is doing here, at some level. But for someone already bowed down with guilty feelings, hell becomes just another nasty doctrine to reject, along with the rest of Christianity. When this happens, it's a tragedy, because the fear of hell is not Jesus' final word on the subject. Jesus final word - his punchline - is his death on Good Friday, and his resurrection on Easter morning.

The fire of hell is never quenched - except that it is! By the humble, living water of Christ. What a marvellous, liberating, joyful joke that is - that love has the last laugh!