

Prison is a great place to reflect on the doctrine of heaven and hell. These people are in hell, perhaps not the lowest circle of it but close enough to see it. From the chapel door inside San Quentin you can see across the courtyard the “Adjustment Center” or SHU (solitary housing unit) known among the prisoners as the “hole.” Beyond that above the roof you can make out a cage-like wire-fence structure inside of which is the back of a backboard that takes up about a third of the visible space. This, I was told by one of the residents, is the exercise yard for the men on death row. Sometimes you can look up, I was told, and see a ball appearing and disappearing on either side of the backboard, as these prisoners have their exercise all alone for one hour a day. Sounds like hell to me.

So when one of the guys at our table asked me was he going to heaven, I was taken aback but not surprised. What took me aback was his openness in revealing the depth of his concern. There was not the slightest tinge of the kind of cynicism that we on the outside are used to regarding such questions with. He looked straight at me, and as I returned his gaze with as much love as I could muster under the circumstances, I thought I saw a softening, something like what “scales falling from his eyes” you read about in the Bible must look like.

Of course, he didn’t just drop the question cold. We had already begun to get acquainted. At Kairos there are six prisoners and four men from the the outside, from the “street” or the free world, who are seated at round tables we call family tables for most of three days. We get to know each other by discussing the talks we have heard from members of the outside team about living out our Christian faith. By this time on Saturday afternoon I was just about to leave, a little earlier than the rest of the team, to get to a wedding I had months before agreed to perform.

We had just heard a talk called “Accepting God’s Forgiveness” and we were discussing it around our table. Just before I was about break-in to excuse myself to take my leave, this guy turns to me across the table and says, “Now, you’re a priest. I’ve broken every commandment. Tell me. Am I going to heaven?” I had already heard from him that he was my age and that he was serving a double-life sentence. Now it seemed as if everybody turned toward me and leaned in. A hush filled the table like that old E.F. Hutton commercial. I took a deep breath and responded with a ploy for more time: “Well, there are many ways I could approach that question.” I sat back and looked at my hands in my lap, praying silently, “Okay Lord, you’re on,” hoping the Holy Spirit would give me the words to say.

Now, maybe this would be a good time to outline how I think about this question, about the question of “Heaven and Hell.” So hang on for a minute and I’ll get back to my friend and my table-family after I try to do a little theology, or anthropology really. The quickest way to get at it is to use a word that has taken on a great deal of both positive and negative baggage in our era. It’s the word MYTH. In the light of Jungian psychology and Joseph Campbell we have learned that myth is an essentially good thing, a conveyer of truth that is deeper than we can convey with propositional statements, one that needs story and archetypal images to communicate truth to our deepest selves. On the other hand, we are all informed by that

essentially Modern, post-Enlightenment understanding, out of which also flows religious fundamentalism that dismisses a myth as the same as “lie” or superstition.

I regard the notion of heaven and hell as a part of the human cultural background, as a kind of anthropological artifact. It is a mythological short-hand or figure of speech that we all somehow understand. More than that, in the hands of a power elite it has provided for most cultures—and still does—an structural instrumentality of reward and punishment for establishing and maintaining order and control. It shouldn't be lost on us that whereas in our milieu people widely pooh-pooh, or demythologize such notions, in prison or the grinding poverty and oppression of the West Bank or Gaza strip heaven and hell have a real palpable currency.

So when the Bible uses the language of heaven and hell, it is simply using the common symbol system or cultural and religious language of its hearers, whether it is enthralled by it or seeking to explode it, puncture it or poke fun at it. More significantly, because of the resurrection and the way it gives to the followers of Jesus the mind or the perspective of the Christ who is forgiveness, who is the risen forgiving victim of those who crucified him, to whom he comes to offer forgiveness—that is to you and me—because of the resurrection we can see through the myth of heaven and hell and the fear of death and judgment it has for so long induced in us. The myth of heaven and hell has been overcome. “Fear not,” says Jesus in John's gospel, “for I have overcome the world.” In the light of the resurrection we can see for the first time that “God is love,” that God is entirely forgiving, even before we are able or worthy to ask. We can talk about heaven and hell as concepts, notions without fear of being condemned for disbelief or disobedience. God's justice has nothing to do with condemnation.

This is precisely what Paul says in the reading from Romans for today. Loosely translated it goes something like this: God's purpose in Christ was to “show us at the present time (and the Greek word here is coincidentally “kairos”) the nature of his justice (that it is love and not condemnation) and that he makes just or righteous (or full of the same love) everyone by the faith of Jesus” (by which he means the “mind” or the “perspective,” the attitude of Jesus). It is not our faith in Jesus that bestows that justice or righteousness or redemption on us; it is Jesus own faith that makes it freely available to us, all of us. There is no longer prisoner or free. We are all one in Christ Jesus.

So let me get back to my friend in San Quentin. I looked straight at him and watched his face soften. “Let me begin,” I said, “by saying that Jesus forgave you from the cross when he said ‘Father forgive them for they know not what they do.’ You're included in that and so am I because by our sins we put Jesus on the cross. And then let me suggest that it's not about getting to heaven anyway. It's about bringing heaven to earth. Don't we pray, ‘thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’ So the question is do you want to be a part of bringing God's love and forgiveness into San Quentin, into your environment wherever it may be. To be an apostle like St. Paul, who called himself the least of the apostles because of his sin. I believe God is calling you to do that, right here, right now.”

This is what Jesus means by “building on the rock” in the Matthew passage. It's not about building as the culture does on who's good and who's bad, who's going to hell and who isn't. It's building on the “stone the builders rejected that has become the head of the corner.”

That stone is Jesus who went to hell willingly to show God's love and justice to sinners. When we love the unloveable, when we visit the outcast, and remember those that society has forgotten, then we build on that stone and turn it into a living temple to bring life to the world.

AMEN.