

**Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> December 2018**  
**Advent 4 (C)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Micah 5.2-5a**

**NT: Hebrews 10.5-10**

**G: Luke 1.39-45**

When the Rector sent through the rota for December, and I saw that I was down to preach on the fourth Sunday of Advent, I thought to myself: 'Oh, hell.' And when you opened your service sheets this morning and saw that I was giving the sermon, no doubt you thought something similar. I refer, of course, to the tradition of using the four Sundays of Advent to preach on the Four Last Things: Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell – so, this being the fourth Sunday, get ready for ten minutes of hell. But what is hell? And what does it have to do with our readings, with Advent, and, indeed, with us? In Scripture more generally, there are a number of terms that seem to function more or less synonymously with our popular ideas of hell as a place of punishment: Sheol, which is the place of the dead, the pit, the outer darkness, the furnace of fire, the eternal fire, Hades, Gehenna – and, no matter what term is used, they all seem to be places where the sinner, the unrighteous, the evil, the wicked, are cut-off from salvation, separated from God, and that this very exclusion from a right relationship with God is, in fact, hell itself, that it is both a place of separation from God, and the condition of being separated from God. Now, in light of this, it is interesting to reflect on the idea that separation from God, and a damaged relationship with our creator, is one of the defining aspects of humanity; therefore, perhaps, it is our sinful, fallen nature itself that is hell, and we are somehow trapped, confined by our sinfulness in our earthly prisons. For the twentieth-century writer and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre: 'Hell is other people.', but, if being separated from God is hell, then perhaps we might say that hell is being a person.

But, of course, there is hope. For Israel, obedience to God through the observance of the Law provided a means by which the gap caused by the separation from the creator could be bridged, and covenant relationship with God restored; and, through this covenant relationship, Israel was to be a sign to the rest of humanity that God had not given up, that we were not abandoned forever. Yet observance of the Law and temple sacrifice alone did not free us from our imprisonment in sin. Two verses before our epistle reading, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says: ‘But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.’ And the writer continues with a quotation from Psalm 40: ‘Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired’ and ‘in burnt-offerings and sin-offerings you have taken no pleasure.’ We cannot free ourselves, and we cannot earn righteousness – it is not a deal, or a bargain, struck with God – this freedom from sin, from hell, is by means of God’s grace, it is God’s gift to give. The writer of Psalm 40 itself expresses this: ‘I have declared your righteousness in the great congregation...Your righteousness I have not hidden in my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation; I have not concealed your loving-kindness and truth...Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me; O Lord, make haste to help me.’

So, how does God free us from sin, from hell, from our earthly prisons? The prophet Micah looks forward to the coming salvation from Bethlehem, from whom: ‘shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days...And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.’ God frees us through the act of God’s self-giving; the writer of Hebrews understands the words of Psalm 40 to be the words of Christ: “‘See, God, I have come to do your will, O God’”; it is this, the sacrifice of God’s self in Jesus

Christ that is the ultimate act of atonement – only God is righteous, and only God can take away sin: ‘it is by God’s will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.’ God comes to meet us whilst we are trapped in hell, imprisoned by sin; in this sense, the account of the Visitation in our gospel reading is a bit like a prison visit: as with the unborn John the Baptist, Jesus is literally inside, meeting us in our imprisonment. God confines God’s self in our human state – eternity shut in a span – to free us from our confinement, to release us from the chains of sin and hell, to bring us to birth in new life. The child in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy – this is a prison visit – but it is also a jail break.

But the mission is not yet complete: we are, perhaps, still in hell, we are not yet out of prison, we have not yet reached the other side of the wall – but we have been shown the way – and we can all play our part in this great escape by taking hold of the hands offered to us by God, by reaching out to Jesus as God reaches out to us in Jesus. And one of the ways we can do this is by reaching out to each other. In February 2016, I began doing some occasional volunteering at what is now called Micah Foodbank – the experience blew my mind and changed my world, and what began as a Lenten discipline for 2016 is something that I still do regularly, all year round. I can still recall vividly the feelings I had as I left the foodbank after my first day of volunteering: I was tired, confused, emptied out – but elated – because the world had changed. And, in truth, this is not because I think that I am helping people – in all honesty, it is because being involved with the foodbank helps me – it is about being part of a community in which everyone helps each other. Because I too am hungry, and I too am fed: I am nourished through the gifts of encounter and friendship, through relationships, gifts given freely to me and gifts that I gratefully accept, gifts that make me aware of my own weakness and the kindness of others; gifts that make manifest the living

presence of God's love. Upon leaving the foodbank that first day, although still imprisoned in my sinful humanity, like the in-utero John the Baptist, I leapt for joy – because I too had encountered Jesus Christ in the people I'd met, in the messy, beautiful complexity of humanity. In becoming one of us, God went through hell, submitting to this earthly prison to encounter us where we are; and, in so doing, God offers us the gift of freedom from sin. During Advent, we again wait for this moment, this Holy Communion, in which God enters our messy, complex humanity – and makes it beautiful; Jesus is other people.

Louis Johnson