

Trinity VI 19 July 2020 Year A Proper 11

Jesus's remarkable style as a teacher was to use pictures to capture his audience's attention. Last week's Gospel was the Parable of the Sower, which anyone in an agricultural society would have grasped immediately. And I thought in that vein I might use some pictures too, which while not of wheat and tares, are of furnaces of fire!

You have two large images of Doom Paintings, scenes of the Last Judgement.

The first on the left is in the Dominican church in Florence of St Maria Novella in the Strozzi di Mantova chapel.

St Thomas Aquinas in the early 13th c and to whom this chapel is dedicated had written amongst many things on the character and structure of the heavenly realm. Dante's Divine Comedy, of 1320 follows this outline. What is depicted is an intricate description of the nine circles of hell.

Dante is even shown in the contemporary stained glass of the chapel, witness to his work illustrated for all to see. We should add that the family who commissioned it in the 1360s were *userers*, money lenders, anxious to expiate their sins. The frescos suffered from bouts of restoration which actually damaged rather than enhancing them!

Meeting with the Roman poet Virgil, his companion on his journey into hell in the vestibule, Dante passes the sign which reads "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

The first circle contains unbaptized and the virtuous pagans, who, although not sinful enough to warrant damnation, did not accept Christ. We learn that Jesus has already released from here Adam, and the patriarchs in the Harrowing of Hell, after his death on the cross.

But those that are left are such classical heroes as Homer, Horace and Ovid. There is also Hector, Aeneas and Julius Caesar. Not to mention Saladin, known for generosity and chivalry at the time of the crusades.

The Second Circle is described as "a part where no thing gleams". Here are those overtaken by lust.

In the third circle, the gluttonous wallow in "a great storm of putrefaction"— as punishment for not mastering their appetites.

The fourth circle is guarded by Plutus, the ancient pagan deity of wealth.

The fifth Circle – is reserved for the wrathful.

In the sixth circle we find heretics.

The Seventh Circle houses the violent: against neighbours; against themselves; against God, Art, and Nature. Usurers are singled out. They are shown as the violent against Art, which is the Grandchild of God. This is interestingly depicted in the fresco and ironic, given the commission.

In the eighth circle we find the counsellors of fraud: sowers of discord; the falsifiers and imposters.

The ninth the final, deepest level of hell is reserved for traitors, betrayers and oath-breakers, its most famous inmate is Judas Iscariot.

At the very pit of hell is Satan condemned for committing the ultimate sin personal treachery against God. His three faces represent a perversion of the Trinity.

Time does not allow more commentary on the monumental fresco from Albi's cathedral in detail. It suffices to say that it is enormous and half of it was removed in the 18th c. It is about 100 years later, having been painted by Franco-Flemish painters from 1474 and taking 10 years. Less Aristotlean, it deals with the results of the seven deadly sins (right to left: Pride, Envy, Wrath, Greed, Gluttony, Lust, with Sloth now being missing). Hell is a world of despair, far from God, where disorder shapes its life. The omni-presence of fire, boiling cauldrons, noxious smells, torture, impalement underline the grimness and degradation of the place.

Perhaps these images illustrate that the mediaeval mind was fascinated with the mechanics of hell, in a way different to us who don't give it very much thought, apart from occasional films. Today's Gospel is quite clear, there comes a judgement at the end of all things, and a binding up and casting into the fire of that which is found wanting. Do I believe this? Are we missing something not to have Doom-Painting of our own here?

During the start of the lockdown, I heard many people outside the Church speaking of the pandemic in terms of judgement, crisis – the same word. I was taken aback by the vehemence of such statements.

I think these paintings were not so much descriptions of actuality in a netherworld as warnings to the faithful.

Today's Gospel which speaks of the burning up of the weeds, is not exactly predictions of what will happen to those who commit terrible sins, but statements of God's justice.

God is just. He is lovable because he is just.

Doom-Paintings are images without God. Christ does not feature in them, hell is a dark and terrible place where his light does not shine. But we know such a place cannot exist. God's judgement is never the last word. Our attempts to make a world of our own where God does not feature are imperfect, disorderly chaos. God's justice rights wrongs, corrects the imperfect and the fallen and turns hell into eternal light.



