Sermon for Advent Sunday RCL Year A

Readings: Isaiah 2:1-5; Rom 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

You have probably all worked out by now that one day you will die. But have you worked out what you think will happen? Have you managed to make sense of what the Bible and Church tells you? It’s not as easy as you might suppose. So whether you believe all these details or not, I will try to summarize what the Methodist Church is supposed to teach you about this momentous event in your life – about death and eternal life. Your guess is as good as mine as to how many Methodist preachers would preach such a sermon. What Methodists in the pews actually believe may be another thing too - depending in which part of the world you are situated.

Death

So first things first: you die. There is more than one way of looking at this. One view is that death is the consequence of Adam sinning. God had created Adam and Eve as immortal beings, destined to enjoy God’s presence forever until they took the apple from the tree. Death was therefore a calamity. God had then to find a way to deal with human sin, which could not be ignored, or God would be unjust. Neither could humanity deal with it alone. Death is portrayed as a tragic consequence of sin and sin is a tragic consequence of human freedom and human freedom is necessary for love to be genuine and God is love and love is the reason we have been created. Death is a punishment that we deserve and only Christ, the sinless One, is good enough to pay the price of sin. By baptism into Christ we share his triumph.

Another view is that death is a natural part of being human and God intended humans to live and then die. It is a consequence of being made a creature within the normal mortality of nature. Life is seen as a veil of soul-making where we learn to be fully human, where we learn how to live as God wishes us to live – with love, justice and mercy. Since we all fall short of God’s high standards, we need God to take care of our sins. However natural dying may be, if death means the end of our being with God, the very purpose of the universe is thwarted, for God created the universe and us as creatures in his own image and likeness in order to share divine love: For true love wills to share itself in an eternal outpouring of grace. God forbids us to take the fruit of the second tree in the Garden of Eden, the tree of life, until he has dealt with our sins. Only after our sins have been dealt with are we ready for eternal fellowship with God.

Methodist teaching probably belongs to that first tradition, but nevertheless is very positive about dying. There used to be the ‘happy death’ tradition in early Methodism when Methodists would gather round the bed of the dying to say farewell, pray for them and rejoice with them that they would very soon be face to face with Jesus.

Judgement

I’m sorry folks; there is no way past this. I know judgement is unpopular today, but the whole purpose of Jesus Christ is to mend what humanity has broken – on that first understanding of death – or to bring to completion what we cannot complete on our own – according to that second interpretation. For God to be God – sin and evil cannot be ignored. For us to be truly human and have freedom to choose between good and evil – God had no other option but to make the choice of evil a real possibility. Jesus is God’s remedy for our wrong choices. All those who acknowledge before God their need to be made righteous, which lies beyond their own capacities, will receive eternal life as a gift.

Those who do not know God, or who have never had the opportunity of hearing the Gospel are to be judged by the merciful Lord according to how well they have followed their conscience which all humans have from the apple in the Garden, and therefore know the difference between right and wrong. Men and women of any time and any creed can know whether it is right to treat another in a way you would not wish to be treated yourself. People may not know Jesus Christ, but they do and can know the Holy Spirit who precedes Christ in the world and touches everyone who is born in the human race, at least to some degree.

When we die we are judged by God. This is known as the personal judgement. Like Dives and Lazarus in the parable Jesus told. Lazarus has been taken to Abraham’s bosom and Dives is already condemned. The penitent thief upon the cross is said to be with Jesus today in paradise.

Paradise or the interim state

This is the most confusing bit of the Christian understanding of the afterlife. According to Catholics, we have to go through purgatory. This has recently been updated by Benedict xvi to mean that painful but glorious meeting with Christ when we rejoice to be finally face to face with our Saviour, but at the same time, feel ashamed of ourselves because of the sins we know we have committed and the poverty of the Christian life we have led. Purgatory is not to be thought of as a place or as a chronological state in the earthly sense, but as an experience we will go through when we meet with the purity of God. Pope Benedict’s wording sounds much more attractive to Methodist ears. Purgatory as a description of part of the process, rather than a “place” in which each soul spends a certain “time” has much to commend it.

Methodists have never believed in purgatory, especially in its old-fashioned formulations, but it does teach Christian Perfection – it does teach that Christians are supposed not just to believe in Christ and continue as they are, but prepare themselves for the life of heaven by striving in this life towards Christian Perfection – which means perfect love.

The Methodist teaching of Christian Perfection and the Catholic teaching of Purgatory do the same thing in different ways. They teach that it matters how you live your life on earth – even if you have been forgiven by Christ because you are a Christian. This is the message in Romans 13:11-14. Conduct matters even for Christians!

Whether you go through the Catholic experience of Purgatory or through the Methodist channel of Christian Perfection – though what happens to Methodists who don’t finish the job before death is open to some doubt – you then enter the INTERIM STATE or paradise. Most Methodists will argue that God gives you the perfection that you lack as an act of divine love, so that upon death you are instantaneously gifted all that you still lack. Some Methodists, however, resist this idea because it sounds too much like “irresistible grace” and they prefer the idea that the co-operation between the believer and God which is necessary in our earthly life continues in our heavenly life. For these Methodists, Perfection is gained gradually after death while you are in paradise.

In paradise you are with God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. You are with the angels of heaven and your loved ones who have gone on before and died in the faith. But this is not the final thing. There is more to come. Wesley also believed that paradise was the interim state, so don’t panic if you think you are being led astray into the Catholic fold!

General Resurrection and the Second Coming

People who do not understand the interim state of paradise are really confused by the idea of the Second Coming and the Day of Judgement. They believe the deceased are now “with Jesus” – such as the penitent thief on the cross in Luke, the saints praising God in heaven in Revelation and when Paul speaks in Philippians of being ready to die and go to be with Christ.

Yet at the same time, we also have references to the future Day of Christ or the Day of Judgement when Christ shall return:

*“At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens.” Mark 13.26*

*“We shall all be changed…in a flash, in a twinkling of the eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.” 1Cor 15.52*

According to Christian teaching, when the Day of Judgement arrives, Christ will come again, his “Second Coming” when the sheep and the goats will be separated. This is the General Judgement, but its outcome is already clear for the deceased who have received their recompense upon their death in their Personal Judgement.

It is at the General Judgement that those who are saved will receive their spiritual bodies, at this time there will be a new heaven and a new earth. It is not the Hebrew way to think of us as diaphanous souls floating about without a body; humans are created body, mind and spirit in the Hebrew tradition – unlike the Greek tradition that despised the physical world and rejoiced to be freed from the body upon death.

The interim state of the deceased comes to an end. Time, creation and humanity have reached their desired goal – fit for all eternity to know and love God – not as helpless puppets, but in the true love of creatures which are free to love.

That is why there has to be a hell. If love is real, it has to be free, and to be free, it must be possible to withhold love. The consequence – or in modern thought, the **state** of withholding your love from God is what we call hell.

Is hell compatible with a loving God? Yes, because without this possibility, love could never be free and therefore could never be truly love. But the Catholics have a nice way of speaking about hell: they insist that hell must exist, but say that they do not know whether there is anybody there or not.

The language of heaven and hell, and life beyond the grave is and has to be poetic language. The Book of Revelation is not a street map of the world to come.

Artists and popular piety have taken things very literally at times over the centuries. More recently, there have been other modern ways of describing these things. Some of the modern ways have been helpful – others have become so vacuous that they are almost denials of eternal life or render Christ superfluous.

But whatever way you imagine these things yourself – this is the general Christian teaching against which any modern interpretation needs to be judged. The greatest mistake of all is to suggest life after death does not exist. For then, we are, as St. Paul said, still in our sins and “the most wretched of people if we have believed only for this life.”

However, according to recent reports, although the number of people in the West who say they believe in God is dropping, the number saying they believe in eternal life is rising. Make sense of that if you can!

Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard

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