

OCTOBER 30, 2016

ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

LUKE 16: 19-31

“WHAT IS HELL LIKE?”

There is an old fable about a farmer who found a strange egg one day in his barnyard. It was quite a big bigger than a chicken egg and he didn't know what kind of bird it was or where it came from. He slipped it under a hen who already was sitting on some soon to be hatched eggs. The hen didn't seem to mind and a few days later the big egg hatched along with the regular sized ones. The new chick from that egg was as strange as the egg itself. He was bigger than the other chicks, very awkward, and ugly. But the other chickens accepted him and all seemed to go well.

Some time later, when all the chicks had grown quite a bit, they were learning how to fly a little as chickens do, fluttering around the barnyard some. One morning, a loud screech was heard from above. All the chicks looked up. The strange chick really stared hard to see where the cry came from----and he saw an eagle very high up soaring majestically near the clouds. The odd chick became very agitated. He took a running start and then lifted off from the ground and flew high to join the eagle in the sky. He himself was an eagle, even though he hadn't known it before. Now he knew who he was and he knew that he was created for the sky, not the farmyard. For the clouds, not for the chicken coop. And he never came back. (Rev. Robert Strutz, sermon on “Heaven”, 1977.)

Each of us was created for something better than here. We were created for something higher---for the kingdom of heaven. To put it in bird terminology—we were made for the clouds, not the chicken coop.

But we have free will and so we can choose a different destination if we wish. Instead of heaven, we can choose to go to hell. Today's gospel reading is about a man who did just that.

Our gospel lesson today, Luke 16:19-31, is our Lord Jesus Christ's parable of two men, Lazarus and Dives, the poor man and the rich man. (The Bible doesn't give the rich man's name, but he is customarily called “Dives”). Dives was really wealthy. He had it made, living high and easy. But he had no interest at all in God or others. He lived totally for himself. And so he totally ignored the other man in the parable, Lazarus. Lazarus was destitute, homeless, sick, and starving----but he loved God. He lay in the street outside Dive's house, hoping for help. But Dives wouldn't give him a crumb.

Lazarus died and went to heaven. Dives died, too, and he went to hell.

Dives had been created by God to be in heaven, but by how he lived, he decided to go to hell. And that is where he went when his life ended.

The Bible is clear about the reality of hell. And it's not just in the Old Testament. In fact, there isn't much about hell in the Old Testament. Most of what the Bible tells us about hell is in the New Testament. Most of what the Bible tells us about hell is told us by our Lord Jesus Himself. So if we don't believe in hell, it's Jesus Christ we're disagreeing

with.

But what is hell like? We don't know the details; we don't know much at all. But we do know some basic things about it.

Hell is often described as separation from God. And that is part of the basic reality about it. (Although describing hell as separation from God does have to be qualified some--I'll do that in a little bit.)

We are made to be with God. And our worst possible fate is to not be with God. So we don't want to go to hell!

Who goes to hell? Those who reject Jesus Christ in this life. Those who aren't interested in Him, who don't care to be with God, or to live for God. They prefer to have as little as possible to do with the Lord. And after death, as a result, they will get what they wanted---to not be with God. That is hell.

A question commonly comes up in connection with the subject of hell. What about people who have never heard of Jesus Christ, or didn't hear enough to make a real decision about the Lord? Wouldn't it be unfair for them to go to hell?

Well, both Christ and St. Paul say in the Bible that God will judge on the basis of how much knowledge someone has. More knowledge? A stricter judgment. Less knowledge? A less strict judgment. We can leave such matters in the hands of God---He is perfectly just and perfectly merciful. And, thankfully, we don't have to decide who goes where!

But the really frightening thing to think about connected to this matter is not to wonder about those who know little or nothing about Christ. But instead---what about those who know lots about Christ? Especially---what about we Orthodox who really know lots about Christ! We have the great blessing of being part of the Church Christ founded on the Apostles. We have the fullness of the gospel. We have available to us all spiritual truth that is possible for humans to comprehend. So if the ignorant get more lenient judgment, and the more knowledgeable get stricter judgment---oh, boy! Are we going to have to give a strict accounting! On Judgment Day, we Orthodox will have no excuses to make. We won't be able to say we had no chance to know the truth. We have all the truth. So be forewarned---on Judgment Day, if there is a line before the throne for those to be strictly judged, that's the line we'll be in! May God have mercy on us, and may we make good use of all the spiritual wealth God has given us.

But maybe sometimes we think that because we are church members and part of the Orthodox Faith we have it made. Part of the true Church, on the parish membership list!

Well, the Pharisees 2000 years ago had a similar way of thinking. They congratulated themselves on being part of God's Chosen People; in fact, they were the religious leaders of the Chosen People. They thought they had it made! But you know how Jesus lambasted them. Basically, he told them to repent or go to hell.

In Revelation 20, St. John has a vision of Judgment Day, that day in the future when Christ returns to our world and all who have ever lived will stand before the throne of God for judgment. And he says books will be very important that day. As St. John writes in Revelation 20:12---"And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also, another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, by what they had done."

The books that will be opened that day are not the membership rolls of parish members. Judgment will not be based on your parish membership, but as St. John writes, “by what they had done.” The books that will be opened that day will show what we have done in this life, how we have lived. Have we lived with Jesus Christ at the center of our lives? That will be the criterion for judgment on that last day.

If on that final day the books that will be opened do not show that Christ was the center of our life here in this world, then that will have been our choice. That will mean we didn’t live for Christ because we really didn’t want all that much to do with Him. And so at Judgment Day, we’ll get what we wanted---to not have anything to do with the Lord forever.

That is the essence of what hell is like---not having Jesus; separated from God. That’s hell.

But....to say that hell is separation from God isn’t totally accurate. Remember I said earlier that that description has to be qualified some....so that’s what I’ll do now.

It is not totally accurate to simply say that hell is separation from God, because God is everywhere. One of the first things our parents teach us about God when we are little is that fact---“God is everywhere”. And everywhere includes hell. As St. David wrote in Psalm 138, verses 7-8---“Where should I go to get away from Your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there. And if I make my bed in hell, You are there.”

God is everywhere, including hell. God’s light and love pour out on all people He has created, including those in hell. But those that have chosen hell don’t want God or His light or His love. They’re just not interested in Him. And so for them, the light and love of God is agony, not joy. St. Isaac of Syria wrote about 1500 years ago---“It is not right to say that sinners in hell are deprived of the love of God....But love acts in two different ways: as suffering in the reprovéd, and as joy in the blessed.” (from a teaching by Father Thomas Galloway, Antiochian Toledo Diocese Conference, June, 2011)

God’s love and light always go out to all. That causes joy for those who love God—that’s what heaven is about. But that causes agony and misery for those who don’t want God’s love and light---that’s what hell is about.

C. S. Lewis, the great Anglican writer, wrote about how the gates of hell are locked on the inside, not the outside. It’s not that God is trying to keep people *in* hell. Just the opposite---the people in hell are trying to keep God *out*! But they can’t totally do that, as His light and love go right to them, even though they don’t want them.

Sometimes people ask if Orthodox believe in hell fire. Yes, we do. Some of the Saints describe for us what they believe hell fire is. Not a physical fire, but the light of God. Because if you don’t want God’s light, but He keeps shining right on you, even in hell, it causes great agony. The people in hell have turned their backs on God. He has not turned His back on them---His light and love still shine upon them. But because they don’t want that, it is horrible for them. The light of God is the fire of hell.

So to conclude---hell is not good! But the good news is that God gives us the freedom to choose either for hell, like Dives in today’s gospel reading, or to choose against hell (and for heaven) like Lazarus in today’s gospel reading. So don’t be like Dives. Be like

Lazarus. Choose God, have faith in Christ, live for the Lord.....By doing so, you are choosing heaven.

Live this life with your face turned towards Jesus. And then your face will be turned to Him forever. And you will always have the joy of God's light shining upon you.

