

Sunday 26C

“They don’t preach about hell anymore.” I’ve heard that said a few times in the course of my ministry. Usually from ladies and gentlemen of a certain vintage. Sometimes with a sigh of relief and sometimes with a twinge of regret. To be honest, usually with a bit of both.

This took me a wee while to figure out. What people don’t miss, I think, is the jabbing of fingers and the rhetoric of hellfire. This was really an attempt to control people through fear. You can control people through fear for a while. It’s effective for as long as you have them under your spell. But once they realise what you’ve been up to, the game’s a bogey. There’s no way back. The Church in Scotland has paid a heavy price for that. The Church in Ireland is paying a heavy price today.

But what people do miss about those days – those who can remember them, at least – is the clarity. The directness of message. And I think there’s some validity to that. There’s an argument that the Church today has got too mealy-mouthed. Afraid to speak frankly and put forth its teaching straightforwardly. Quick to reassure, but slow to issue the call to repentance. We’ve tried to draw the next generation in through compassion. In reply, laughed in our faces.

The question arises, then: can we find a happy medium? Can our generation be the one to stop overcompensating for the mistakes of previous generations? Can we find that space – because there has to be one – between the carrot and the stick, between the arm round the shoulder and the kick up the backside?

In our Gospel passage, Jesus preaches about hell. There’s no getting away from it. There’s no saying, “Yes, he was using the concepts of his time, but that’s not what he really meant.” No, the meaning of his words is perfectly clear. He loves us, and because he loves us, he wants to warn us. He wants to warn us that the other place is real: it is one of the possible outcomes of the radical gift of freedom which God gives human beings. If there was a big hole in the road up ahead, wouldn’t you be grateful to the person who took the trouble to warn you about it?

Of course, you would. So, it’s OK to talk about hell. Not to obsess about it, or to dread it, or to use it as a tool to control people. But it’s OK – not just OK but important and necessary – to underline that this is one of the possibilities available to human freedom. If it were not – if that possibility was completely foreclosed – then our choices would be meaningless. Think about it: the meaning of any story is only given by its ending. If the gates of heaven were just unconditionally open, to the best and the worst of people, then the meaning of every life would ultimately be the same. But the meaning of every life is *not* ultimately the same. For as long as we are alive, we can change the meaning of that story. The good thief, as we know, changed the meaning of his story with his dying breath. But once we go to God, our story is told, its meaning is set and its outcome is determined.

It’s precisely because Jesus knew all this that he told that parable about the complacent rich man. A man so desensitised by overindulgence that he never once gave a thought to how his story would end. The good Lord would not have us share his fate. If we consider here

and now how our story *could* end, if we were to imitate that rich man, then we can avoid his complacency. We can take steps to ensure that, when the end of our story *does* come, it will be a happy one.

So, there you have it. A sermon about hell – but not, I hope, as of the old school. Not an effort to control you through fear. But equally, not an effort to sugar-coat the Gospel. A midpoint, I hope, between the arm round the shoulder and the kick up the backside.