

# Eternal Loss

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The most interesting article to come to my notice recently from the religious press appeared in the August 1988 issue of *Life and Work*, the monthly record of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. This issue was largely devoted to the jubilee of the Iona Community, and the Editor had the excellent idea of inviting an assessment of the Community's achievement from Donald MacLeod, the professor of systematic theology at the (dissenting) Free Church College in Edinburgh<sup>1</sup>. Perceptive, astringent, humorous, always controversial, sometimes (as has been remarked in subsequent correspondence) a little unfair, this article had the supreme merit of puncturing complacency and, at the same time, making important constructive suggestions.

Writing of what he sees to be the Community theology, Professor MacLeod says that 'it has room for the Incarnation but not for the Atonement, and simply cannot bring itself to summon individuals (including the poor) to repentance. Terrified of proselytising, it refuses to evangelise.'<sup>2</sup> While such a tendency may characterize those who have been touched by the emphases of the Iona Community, it may be said that in the Christian world at large we have to reckon with a passionate renewal of traditional, even fundamentalist, Evangelical teaching. But what gives Professor MacLeod's remark its peculiar point is the fact that it is addressed sympathetically to those whose theological sophistication may have immunised them against serious engagement with the themes of, for instance, A.M. Toplady's classic hymn *Rock of Ages*:

... Nothing in my hand I bring,  
Simply to Thy Cross I cling;  
Naked, come to Thee for dress;  
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;  
Foul, I to the Fountain fly;  
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.  
While I draw this fleeting breath,  
When my eyelids close in death,  
When I soar through tracts unknown,  
See Thee on Thy Judgment Throne;  
Rock of ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in Thee.

Where hell is concerned, we have all of us learnt to be on guard not simply against the ferocious simplicities of hell-fire preachers, but also against the sadism disguised in the poetry of Dante's *Inferno*, and the kind of threat that constrained Stephen Daedalus to repentance in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. We have learnt comfortably to demythologize the dramatic, apocalyptic imagery employed by Jesus, welcoming, for instance, the claim that the heightening of tone characteristic of Matthew's record can be discounted as the Evangelist's own embroidering of the tradition he inherited. Yet no *pericopē* peculiar to Matthew's record is more often quoted than the climactic allegory of the sheep and the goats (Mt. 25:31—46), with its profoundly ironic teaching concerning faith and works. It is infinitely searching; yet the ending (v.46) is clear: the goats depart to eternal punishment (*eis kolasin aiōnion*), but the just to eternal life. The allegory is innocent of the kind of sadism that often infects not simply proclamation of the 'wrath to come', but also ethical discussion of the need for retributive punishment. What is asserted is the ultimacy of the issues treated in the allegory: failure of discernment expressed in a response is a matter of final significance.

The whole record of the ministry of Jesus is unintelligible apart from the reality of judgement, present and to come, but always implied as somehow ultimate and irrevocable. It is not only in the fourth Gospel that God's judgement is presented as come into the world with the mission of Jesus, giving a final significance to the response of men and women to his words, his works and his presence among them. Simeon warns Mary in Luke 2:34 that the child whom she has brought to the Temple is 'set for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against'. Repeatedly Jesus is portrayed as warning of their devastating guilt those who reject the one who has come into their midst. A kind of tragic climax is reached in the words referring to Judas in Matthew and Mark, that 'it had been better for that man if he had not been born'. In the allegory of the sheep and the goats judgement has been given to the Son of Man, he who has come in Jesus 'to seek and save that which was lost', and it is his presence in the least of his brethren that has to be acknowledged. Failure to do so is imbued with irrevocable consequence.

We could continue much longer with examples. Jesus says it were better for those guilty of offence against the innocent that a stone were hanged about their necks and they were drowned in the depths of the sea. Would not death in childhood have been better for those who lived to help herd the Jews of Europe into the trucks that were to bear them to Auschwitz?

The interpenetration of the themes of judgement and deliverance in the Gospels is inescapable. One cannot grasp, or even begin to grasp, the

sense of the latter apart from the former. It is in the ministry of Jesus that the arraignment with which Paul confronts his readers at the outset of his letter to the Romans receives concrete interpretation, and the redemption which the apostle in triumphant ecstasy acclaims in Romans 8:31 ff. is one that has measured the depths of that from which men and women must be delivered.

The themes of judgement to come, of judgement final and irrevocable, of the judgement not of men but of God 'to whom all hearts are open, all desires known', belong to the heart of the New Testament message. We know, moreover, that in that message judgement involves condemnation, a No as well as a Yes. We may turn aside from that recognition. We are, indeed, abundantly justified in insisting that judgement is given by one whose ways are not as our ways. Here a metaphysical rejection of anthropomorphism is strongly reinforced by prophetic insistence on the searching quality of the divine scrutiny, on the unexpectedness of the verdict, unforgettably caught in the allegory of the sheep and the goats. In talking about this judgement, as always *in rebus divinis*, it is anthropomorphism that is the enemy. The discipline of a negative theology is never more essential than here.

And that discipline must be extended where any use is made, in this connection, of penal or quasi-penal notions. What, if anything, do we mean by eternal punishment? We have all smiled at the story of the hell-fire preacher who warned a toothless gaffer that teeth would be provided for gnashing, indestructible as no dentures supplied on the National Health Service can be. Yet we have also encountered in text-books of dogmatic theology itemization of the pains of hell (*poena damni*, *poena sensus*, etc.) remarkably reminiscent of the classifications of distinguishable clinical symptoms in text-books of medical pathology. It is precisely these sorts of crudity (together with the more sophisticated variants to be found in Dante's masterpiece) that have provoked reaction in a universalist direction, as if the difference between Hitler, Streicher, Himmler, on the one hand, and their victims on the other, could somehow be obliterated.

In lectures on Christian doctrine given in 1939—40 before the University of Cambridge, the late Dr J.S. Whale<sup>3</sup> criticized a facile optimism regarding the ultimate fate of the evil-doer, by suggesting that we cannot suppose the issues of human life to be 'ultimately frivolous'. In my view, that brief pregnant comment succeeded in focussing with effective simplicity the central issue raised by Christian insistence on the reality of hell. But if there is eternal punishment, we do well to veer to a near-total agnosticism concerning its nature. If we catch hints and more than hints of sentimentalism in those who preach a comfortable universalism, we must never forget the sadistic indulgence of those who have delighted to portray in supposed detail the torments of the damned.

If the latter can claim a measure of authority from texts of scripture, they have also, by their obvious enjoyment of their theme (I would again recall the preacher in Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*) done untold damage to the gravity of the message they sought to proclaim. They have presented issues of ultimate import so obscenely that the substance of the word is totally obscured by the manner of its proclamation.

It may, of course, be said that today we have to reckon with the fact that anything we say concerning the ultimate issues of human life, of a judgement to come, etc., begs the question of the intelligibility of anything we may say concerning personal survival of death, and in particular concerning the persistence of individual human memory following the death of the body. If we are not able to remember, to recast our frequently blurred, distorted, refashioned memories of what we have been and done, how may we receive that judgement which awaits us? The agnostic discipline is imposed on us as soon as we ask who or what it is that shall be judged by God.

In his article, written from a profoundly evangelical standpoint, Professor MacLeod does not mention hell, nor do his words on the subject of the preaching of repentance include mention of wrath to come. I quoted at the opening of this article his reference to the Atonement, because there he seemed to concentrate much of what he was saying, and because by that reference he provided the context in which, in my view, theological discussion of eternal loss must take place.

Repentance, though including purpose of amendment, is essentially retrospective. It looks back on what has been done. Punishment (and this is very elementary moral philosophy) is likewise necessarily retrospective: we can only be punished for what we have done or failed to do in breach of law. Does God punish, or need to punish? Again we need to be careful. If it can be said that in any sense God punishes the evil-doer, that punishment (if we can begin to conceive it) must be stripped of every association with punishment as we know it—whether we think of capital punishment, corporal punishment or imprisonment as experienced in any known or imaginable penal institution.

Further, if God be said to punish, the offences of which he takes account do not by any means have their place in a list of statutory breaches of law. The One 'to whom all hearts are open, all desires known' passes judgement on the hidden and secret springs of human conduct. In Christ's allegory, the goats, as much as the sheep, are stunned, in their case by revelation of their failures in insight and response. Yet, as discussion of repentance and retribution alike brings out, the retrospective dimension cannot be left out. That which has been done cannot be undone. It is woven into the scheme of things, and to pretend otherwise is to indulge in make-believe. The irrevocable remains irrevocable.

It is precisely this element of sheer irrevocability that the classical theology of the Atonement has sought to emphasize, seeking to find in Christ's work, made perfect by his acceptance of utter rejection, the impenetrable secret of the divine judgement. Of course, the barbarous crudity of various forms of the penal theory of Atonement has obscured this. Over and over again the discipline of a negative theology has been rejected in the interest of a facile evangelistic formula. The image of a compulsively vindictive Father visiting on his Son the consequences of humankind's transgression of his ways needs unhesitating rejection as blasphemous anthropomorphism. The discipline of negative theology is required to help us on our way also to read more surely the manner and purpose of Christ's rejection and passion.

But we are not without guides to help us on our way—for instance, Anselm, Abelard, the 19th-century Scotsman John MacLeod Campbell—none able to take us more than a very little distance, but all reminding us that we need to enlarge our understanding by a deeper and more imaginative purchase held on the narrative basis of our faith. The classical theology of the Atonement is not something that can be contained in a text-book. Rather, it is the record of a continuing exploration. But it is in the setting of that record that we must find the context in which to treat of eternal loss.

So this brief essay ends with a plea that we make a new effort to treat Christocentrically the sombre and grave aspects of our faith. But if our treatment is not to be entirely inadequate, we must never let ourselves forget that we are exploring the outskirts of a mystery. The secrets of the Ultimate (even if for the Christian they are laid bare, *secundum modum recipientis*, in Christ) belong with God alone. 'Of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.' (Mark 13:32)<sup>4</sup>

1 *Life and Work: Record of the Church of Scotland*, August 1988, pp. 23—25.

2 op. cit. p. 24.

3 J.S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine*, Cambridge 1941.

4 Any insight this essay may contain it owes very largely to the works of Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar, and to the disturbingly interrogative article by Professor Donald MacLeod.