

EDITORIAL

AT the beginning of November the commemoration of All Souls brings to mind the doctrine of Purgatory, and all that is involved in it. For us personally it involves responsibility for others we have known and loved, who have gone before us with the sign of faith and who, where they now are, may well be sadly needing our prayers and Masses. It also involves the prospect that in due time we shall ourselves be needing, as we cannot but fear, the charitable prayers of those we have left behind on earth.

At the end of November Advent is in sight. In preparation for it, on the last Sunday of the Church's year, our Lord with prophetic vision and speaking in the language of a long succession of Hebrew prophets, foretells his coming again to execute God's final judgment on the world and on ourselves. What makes this gospel mysterious and obscure is that Christ, as the Hebrew prophets his predecessors often did, spoke of a remote event in terms of one near at hand. He prophesied the final dissolution of the created universe as we know it, and God's judgment on it, in terms of the only less terrible destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, forty years after his death. God's judgment on his chosen people, who had not known the time of their visitation and had rejected their Messiah and Saviour, was a symbol of his final and universal judgment on the world.

Yet in this prophecy, couched in apocalyptic imagery representing, but not to be confused with, literal truth, one thing is wholly certain, a certainty we affirm in the creed at Mass: 'He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead.' In this way Advent brings us warning of judgment to come. That warning in its turn, if taken with the deep seriousness due to it, should make hell, please God, remotely, but purgatory immediately, a reality both for ourselves and those we love.

For if death overtakes us before the great and dreadful day (we tend quite unwarrantably to assume that it will), we shall be judged, as the Church teaches, at a *particular* judgment. That judgment will be personal and will decide our personal destiny. At the last day, however, the lives of all men will be judged in the whole context of God's completed plan. The final effect of

every life as it has been lived, and every action good or bad that it has produced, will be seen in its complete results. Those results reach far beyond the limits of individual lives or particular periods of history; for the repercussions of every human act may well be continuously effective down the ages until the consummation of time.

At the last great vindication of God's justice and mercy, before angels and men, a paean of praise will go up, from all his saved creation, because by his omnipotent power he has been able to bring good out of every evil. In a mysterious way the whole history of the world will be displayed like a vast and complex tapestry, millions upon millions of threads, each thread a human life, woven into a many-coloured and intricate pattern of God's designing. Every event, and God's purpose in every event, will be clearly visible, and in them the triumph of his love and power. Then will begin the fullness of the kingdom of God and his Christ; the blessed life so mysterious and unimaginable, only to be grasped here by us in faith.

It is inevitable, no doubt, that our own particular judgment should loom larger in our minds than this unimaginable and apparently remote consummation. For of all the certain things that happen to us particular judgment is the most certain. Even if we are alive at the last day our judgment will be a part of the general judgment, while if death is to be our lot we shall pass to our judgment at its supreme moment. There we shall stand before a tribunal where justice is certain; where there is no escape and no possibility of evasion. We shall see ourselves as we are, no longer with our own eyes, which so often deceive us. We shall see ourselves, for the first time, as God sees us; all make-belief, blindness, hypocrisy and self-deception stripped away. This thought is enough to make us pray constantly that at that moment of decision we may pass by God's mercy to a blessed purgatory.

Blessed, because we shall know that heaven is secure, we shall have had a glimpse of its meaning and depth such as on earth we never caught. But that glimpse will be the cause of intense pain, the pain of unfulfilled desire for the sole good we shall then long for with all the intensity of our being. The pain of that longing will be frustrating but purifying, the purifying fire of God's love, which purges and hurts in its purging, as it burns away the dross. It is a healing caustic.

In purgatory, we are told, there is duration, but not time as we know it in our present world of sense. God in his mercy gives us time here to become saints, and saints we must become if we are to fulfil our destiny. Fidelity to whatever obedience our vocation brings us makes us saints. Yet we shrink from faithfulness to that steady plodding, so often apparently unrewarding. We shrink because it is hard, ordinary and uninteresting. Do we think enough of purgatory, that unknown second stage of the life that is granted us, that lies between death and the vision of God? It may be a long dreary period of hard frustrating purification, all the harder because it is purely passive, a lonely waiting for what we long for so intensely, more rigorous and wearying in its demands than anything we could have suffered here. Yet necessary because of the graces we have neglected and the opportunities we have missed; necessary to fit us, as they would have done had we used them, for the vision of God's purity, the sharing of which will be our eternal joy and satisfaction.



HELL AND HEAVEN

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IF we turn to the Scriptures, under the guidance of the teaching Church, for enlightenment concerning the doctrine of everlasting punishment, we shall find two things stated in them with painful clarity by our Lord himself. There is a final punishment for the unrepentant; it is eternal and it is fire. *If thy hand scandalize thee, cut it off. It is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into unquenchable fire; where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not extinguished* (Mark ix, 42). And again: *Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, which was prepared for the devil and his angels* (Matt. xxv, 41-42). In the moving passage too, in St John's gospel, where our Lord sets out his teaching about himself as the way, the truth and the life, under the image of the vine and the branches, the same warning is contained; that burning by fire is the inevitable result of complete