

Letter from Bulletin of July 27, 2003

Dear Parishioners,

It must be the heat! I want to share a few summertime thoughts on the devil and hell! Two related and slightly surprising items made the news in recent years. One was the result of two major polls that showed belief in the devil more widespread in the U.S. than its ever been since pollsters began asking the question in the 1950's. The second item was the description by news reporters and evangelical leaders of Pope John Paul II as "soft selling hell" and making it just "a state of mind".

During the high temperatures of the last two weeks, my own hell-bent thoughts went to the cartoon showing two men standing up to their waists in hell fire with one of the commenting, "But it's a dry heat!".

The biblical authors were neither stenographers for God nor eyewitness reporters on the physical conditions of the after life. Instead they were inspired and passionate about communicating their faith convictions in language and a world view familiar to their intended audience. Two things about the biblical descriptions of hell: 1) while important and endlessly provocative, it always points toward a reality that remains beyond our comprehension; 2) it keeps changing: there's "Gehenna", first a valley southwest of Jerusalem where children had been sacrificed to a pagan God, later a burning garbage area; there's a place "of weeping and gnashing of teeth"; there's St. Paul's negative description that the truly wicked have no place in the kingdom. Pope John Paul II says, "Sacred Scripture uses many image to describe the pain, frustration and emptiness of life without God."

Most people today find it hard to think of heaven as a place of happiness up in the sky or of hell as a fiery furnace down below. As one major theologian, Karl Rahner, puts it – the biblical images of hell are not graphic

previews or detailed pictures of the fate of the wicked. Rather they are metaphors meant to reveal deeper truths about our existence as free creatures responsible to a Divine Judge. Our essential freedom allows us to say a final and definitive “no” to the loving God who relentlessly pursues us. And separation from that God would be the ultimate tragedy.

According to Pope John Paul II, “Hell is not a punishment imposed externally by God, but the condition resulting from attitudes and activities people adopt in their life”; hell is more than a physical place and is better understood as “the state of those who freely and definitely separate themselves from God, the source of all life and joy.”

It is also worth remembering that the Bible insists that wherever sin exists, forgiveness and grace even more abound. Heaven and hell are not equal options. The flow of the universe is toward fulfillment and unity with its Creator, not ultimate alienation and estrangement. Saying no to God is contrary to our authentic impulses and our best instincts. We need only remember our basic Baltimore Catechism question: “Why did God make me?” The divine plan is to restore all things in Christ.

One modern theologian, known for his generally conservative view and his strong influence with the Vatican was Hans Urs von Balthasar. Before his death in 1988 he published a surprising book entitled “Dare We Hope?”. He argues that we can at least hope that all human beings are ultimately saved because of the immensity and power of divine love.

If this summer heat continues, I’ll write about the devil next week!

Your Pastor,
Brian Joyce