

That all shall be saved?¹

St Brandon's

Romans 11: 1-2a; Matt. 15: 21-28

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The nameless Canaanite woman in our gospel reading is a hero. First, of course, she's a hero to her daughter whose life she redeems by confronting Jesus with her wit and persistence, believing that somehow He has the power to cast out the demon her daughter is suffering from. Second, she's a hero to her own people, for not accepting that God values them any less than the 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' to whom Jesus claims He is sent. Third, she's a hero to all those in every era – though perhaps particularly to women – who have known themselves to be despised and rejected by what we might call the 'keepers of earthly versions of the heavenly Kingdom' – Jesus's own disciples in this case.²

But while there's a lot we can learn from her, I want to focus on Jesus's initial reply. Did He really mean that He was sent *only* to the lost sheep of the house of Israel? In John's gospel, for example, He says, 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth [on the cross], will draw *all* people to myself' (12:32) – though some versions have 'all things' instead of 'all people', and some translations even make it 'drag' rather than 'draw' – 'I will drag all things to myself'!³ And, of course, at the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus's great commission to His disciples is to 'go and make disciples of *all* nations'. These are universal statements, from which it is pretty easy to make the case that God's *invitation* through Christ is to *everyone*.

But that, in a sense, is the easy bit – we can all, presumably, agree that God's invitation is universal. The difficult bit, of course, is what happens to those who do not accept the invitation. But that is something that St Paul is grappling with in the passage from Romans that we heard this morning. Despite the expectation that God would send a Messiah, Paul acknowledges that many of his own people, the Israelites, have not recognised or accepted that Jesus was indeed that long-awaited Christ. What happens to them? Well one thing that Paul is absolutely clear about is that God has not given up on them: '... has God rejected his people? By no means! God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. For the gifts and the calling of God are *irrevocable*.' Irrevocable – in other words, can never and will never be revoked, not in time nor beyond time. Never.

OK, but that's 'God's *people*'. It could be taken to be referring to a collective, Israel, not necessarily every individual. But in the same passage from Romans, though not part of our reading, Paul concludes, 'And so *all* Israel will be saved ... for from him and through him and to him are *all things*' (11: 26, 36). And earlier in Romans, Paul, in a similar vein to our passage, has said, 'Therefore just as one man's trespass [Adam] led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness [Jesus] leads to justification and life *for all*' (5: 18). And similarly, Paul says in his letter to the Colossians that, 'through Christ God was pleased to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven' (1: 20). So, it seems pretty

¹ The title is taken from a book of the same name, except without the question mark and with the subtitle 'Heaven, Hell and Universal Salvation', by David Bentley Hart, Yale University Press, 2019. I use arguments from this book at various points.

² See Cally Hammond's commentary, Church Times, 18 August, 2023.

³ Bentley Hart, *op. cit.*, p.98, although he stays with 'everyone' rather than 'all things'.

clear from these verses that it is not just that God's invitation is to all, but that in the end all shall be saved.

Now in my early days as a Christian, in my early 20s, it was the common understanding amongst those Christians and those Churches with whom and to which I was affiliated, that 'salvation' was granted only to those who confessed Jesus as Lord and Saviour. And that all others who refused to accept the invitation in this life were thereby excluded from salvation, and so were destined for hell. And, while we didn't talk about it very much, there was an implicit understanding that hell involved eternal torment or, which is not very much better, annihilation. And so, it was important, of course, that we evangelised as many as possible, to try to bring them into the Kingdom of God.

And, of course, there are verses from and passages of scripture which seem to lend credence to that view. Probably the apparently most conclusive of those comes from Matthew 25, the parable of the sheep and goats, where Jesus says that these (the goats) 'will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous (the sheep) into eternal life' (25: 46).

Now I have to confess that I did not really question this view of salvation for a very long time. I believed that I should believe that this is the way things are. However, I am now not at all sure that I did actually believe that. And one reason for that is that we, happily, had children. Now if it was the case that I believed for sure that any child of mine who grew up and didn't confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour would be destined for eternal punishment, then quite clearly I should not have been party to giving them life.⁴ It would have been morally abhorrent to do so. That would have been the only possible logical conclusion. But we did have children, so giving the lie to what I apparently believed.

Then, of course, my understanding of God has changed and become, I hope, truer to who He actually is. God *is* love. His steadfast love *never* ceases, his mercies *never* come to an end (Lamentations 3: 22). The gifts and the calling of God are *irrevocable*, as Paul tells us. God is Good (capital G), and there is therefore nothing in His nature that could be other than good,⁵ and as a result, He can will nothing that is not for the good of all things in His creation. And it follows from that that God could not be the creator of anything evil.⁶ Evil may and does flow from God's creation, particularly from mankind as the apparent pinnacle of that creation, but such evil could not arise directly from or be the purpose of God. Indeed, His very purpose is to overcome evil with good.

And if all that, then it follows that God cannot have created hell, or will that souls who have not confessed Jesus as Lord and Saviour should 'descend' to eternal punishment. Does hell, then, not exist? The strongest argument for hell's existence is that any human being, of their own free will, can reject God's invitation. Excluding themselves from God's presence puts them, by definition, into hell, since hell must be where God is not. So hell is 'a profound and imprisoning misery that we impose upon ourselves by rejecting the love that alone can set

⁴ Bentley Hart makes this point beautifully, *op. cit.*, p.30.

⁵ Bentley Hart, *op. cit.*, p.60.

⁶ See Bentley Hart, *op. cit.*, p.70-1.

us free.⁷ It is this understanding that C.S. Lewis explores in his book on heaven and hell 'The great divorce', of a hell that is a self-inflicted miserable existence which can continue for ever.

But there is a problem with the free will argument, and (dare I say it!) with C.S. Lewis's analysis of it. Jesus says that it is the truth which will make us free (John 8: 32), and of course claims to be that very truth Himself (John 14: 6). And the truth, as we understand it from within the Christian tradition, is that we are, each and every one of us, created in God's image. And the implication of that is that we are oriented toward God's divine purpose, and thus can be 'fulfilled in ourselves only insofar as we can achieve the perfection of our natures in union with God.'⁸ Our true freedom, our true fulfilment, our true happiness, our true selves lie only in and with God.

And God, of course, knows all that, and has already done all that is needed to win us over to Him. Because we have to see hell in the light of the victory that God has already achieved in Christ through His death and resurrection. 'Hell appears in the shadow of the cross as what has already been conquered, as what Easter leaves in ruins. Hell exists, so long as it exists, only as the last terrible residue of a fallen creation's enmity to God, the lingering effects of a condition of slavery [rather than freedom] that God has conquered universally in Christ and will ultimately conquer individually in every soul. And thus, in the Age to come, and beyond all ages, all shall come home to the Kingdom prepared for them from before the foundation of the world.'⁹ God will draw, or possibly almost drag, all people and all things to Himself. Love will never let go, and love will win out. So that in the end God will be all in all, as Paul tells us (1 Corinthians 15: 28), and hell, in so far as it exists, will be empty.

That, at least, is the universalist argument. Now I know that I have not covered everything, so here all I can add is that this argument does still find a serious place for judgement and for justice, but sees these as leading to rehabilitation rather than eternal punishment or annihilation.¹⁰ And it does take the Bible, and all the passages that seem to indicate a hell of eternal punishment including Matthew 25, seriously, but finds that these do not stand up to critical scrutiny.¹¹

Is this all, then, just wishful thinking? Wouldn't it just be nice if things were really this way? Well, I was encouraged to learn that the universalist argument and understanding was the majority view for at least the first 500 years of the Church's existence.¹² Why it was overtaken by the opposite view, by those others who became the 'keepers of earthly versions of the heavenly Kingdom', we don't have time to go into now. For me, at least, it is not wishful thinking, but a morally, logically and scripturally coherent position to take. That,

⁷ Bentley Hart, *op. cit.*, p.62.

⁸ Bentley Hart, *op. cit.*, p.172.

⁹ Bentley Hart, *op. cit.*, p.129.

¹⁰ See Bentley Hart, *op. cit.*, p.168-9, and also p.103-4 where he posits two horizons, one at the threshold between this age and the age to come where there are those who have surrendered to God's love and those who have not; and a final horizon where even those who have travelled as far from God as it is possible to go will finally find their way home.

¹¹ See Bentley Hart, *op. cit.*, p.111-8.

¹² Bentley Hart, *op. cit.*, p.1.

for me, is where an understanding of God as love, a God whose gifts and calling are *irrevocable*, a God whose mercies *never* come to an end, leads me.

Amen.