



Lesson 5 – Jesus and Hell.

Jesus was boring – He was gentle, quiet, excessively nice, a somewhat fragile guy. He walked around in flowing robes, never dirty. He liked to hold a small lamb in His arms. Or He was an abstract part of a mathematical equation, not important primarily because of what He said or how He lived, but only because He filled a role in the cosmic calculus of damnation and forgiveness.

The real Jesus was far more complex and interesting than any of these caricatures. And nowhere was He more defiant, subversive, courageous and creative than when He took the language of fire and brimstone from His greatest critics and used it for a very different purpose.

In Jesus' day, as even in our own, more traditional Jewish people – especially those of a political and religious group known as the Sadducees – had little to say about the afterlife, about miracles and angels.

Their focus was on this life and on how to be good and faithful human beings within it. The Pharisees however had welcomed ideas on the afterlife from neighbouring cultures and religions.

Jesus clearly agreed that there was an afterlife and death was not the end for Jesus. But one of the most striking facets of His life and ministry was the way He took popular understandings of the afterlife and turned them upside down.

Who was going to Hell?

Was it the rich and successful people who lived in fancy houses and stepped over their destitute neighbours who slept in the gutters outside their gates?

Read: Luke 16:19-31

Who was going to Heaven?

The very people whom the religious elite despised, deprived, avoided, excluded and condemned.

Heaven's gates opened wide for the poor and destitute who shared in few of life's blessings, the sinner, the sick and the homeless who appreciated God's grace and forgiveness all the more.

Read: Matthew 25:31-40

Jesus wasn't so much teaching about hell as He was *un-teaching* about Hell. In so doing, He wasn't simply arguing for a different understanding of the after-life. He was doing something far more important and radical – proclaiming a transformative vision of God.

God is not the one who punishes some with poverty and sickness, nor is God the one who favours the rich and rightness.

God is the one who loves everyone, including the people the rest of us think don't count. The fire and brimstone passages that countless preachers have used to scare people weren't intended to teach us about hell: Jesus used the language of hell to teach us a radical new vision of God.

And He also used it to warn of the catastrophe that would happen if people continued to follow their current road – a wide and smooth road leading to violence. Violence won't produce peace He warned – it will produce only more violence.

Jesus' purpose was not to predict the destruction of the universe or to make absolute for all eternity the insider-outsider categories of *us and them*. Its purpose was to wake up complacent people. As in the ancient story of Jonah, God's intent was not to destroy but to save.

Read: Jonah 4:1-11

Sadly many "religious" people still use the imagery of hell in the way that Jesus sought to reverse. Like Jonah, they seem disappointed that God's grace might get the final word. If more of us would re-examine this dimension of Jesus' teaching and come to a deeper understanding of it, we would see what a courageous, subversive and fascinating leader He was, pointing us to a radically different way of seeing God, life and being alive.

Engage:

- 1. What one thought or idea has intrigued, provoked, disturbed or challenged you?**
- 2. How did you respond to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus?**
- 3. Can you recall a situation where someone confronted you with a mistake or fault and you didn't respond well?**

Activate:

This week, look for people like Lazarus in the parable and refuse to initiate the rich man in your response to them.

Meditate:

Imagine the rich man walking by Lazarus in the gutter.

In silence – ask God if you are stepping over anyone in your life.