

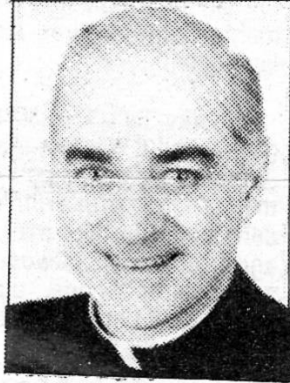
Shall We Give Them Hell?

Some people become angry with me when I write about God's unconditional love. One letter went like this: Why don't you priests talk about hell any-more? You make it seem like everyone is going to heaven!

I can't speak for priests in general, but I don't think everyone is going to heaven. There are malicious people in the world. Jesus spoke of the punishment of God and the prospect of hell about 90 times in the Gospels. Even though he died to bring salvation to all his children, it is at least probable that some will resist his love. I hope I'm wrong.

Jesus rebuked the Scribes and Pharisees because by their strict interpretations of the Torah they placed heavy burdens on the people. He rarely scolded the lay people. When he kicked over the tables of the money changers in the temple, it was to express his exasperation with those in authority who allowed this preoccupation with money to flourish. "My father's house is a house of prayer," he said. "You have made it a den of thieves."

Jesus treated the common people more gently, and he always tried to encourage the outcast. For instance, in Jesus' day, lepers were thought to be under God's curse. They weren't even allowed to come to temple to be purified; anyone who talked to them was considered defiled. Jesus ignored the law in reaching out to them. He wanted to tell them not to believe the teachers of Israel. "You are not cursed, no you are blessed. Blessed are the



poor in spirit. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after justice."

The reactionaries of his time were, of course, furious with Jesus for being so lenient with the lepers and all the others who were thought to be morally unfit. When the woman was taken in adultery, Jesus treated her with kindness. Without even asking her to repent, Jesus was ready to risk his own safety to protect her from the mob. He said, "Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone." When they walked away, he turned to her and asked, "Has no one condemned you? Then neither do I condemn you."

Why don't the priests talk about hell the way the priests did years ago? I wonder. Maybe it's because they don't want to scare people into believing that God is a legalistic monster.

Perhaps we should be more aggressive, and go after some church leaders the way Jesus went after the Scribes and Pharisees of his day, especially those who show little compassion for their people. Maybe we should kick over those ever increasing diocesan assessments which tend to make collection agents out of our pastors.

Maybe we should preach fire and brimstone to the criminal element; if only they would come to church and listen. The only people who come to church are those who are trying to be good, and I'd rather offer them encouragement and hope, the way Jesus did in his day.

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