



## **‘WHAT IS HELL?’**

‘Fathers and teachers! I ask: What is Hell? I answer: Suffering on account of the impossibility to love any longer’. These are the words of Elder Zosima, Dostoyevsky’s celebrated monk in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Why Hell? many people ask. Why does God condemn people to eternal damnation? How can the image of God the Judge be reconciled with the New Testament message of God as love? St Isaac the Syrian answers these questions in the following way: there is no person who would be deprived of God’s love, and there is no place which would be devoid of it; everyone who deliberately chooses evil instead of good deprives himself of God’s mercy. The very same Divine love which is a source of bliss and consolation for the righteous in Paradise becomes a source of torment for sinners, as they cannot participate in it and they are outside of it.

It is therefore not God Who mercilessly prepares torments for a person, but rather the person himself who chooses evil and then suffers from its consequences. There are people who deliberately refuse to follow the way of love, who do evil and harm to their neighbours: these are the ones who will be unable to reconcile themselves with the Supreme Love when they encounter it face to face. Someone who is outside of love during his earthly life will not find a way to be inside it when he departs from the body. He will find himself in ‘the valley of the shadow of death’ (Ps.23:4), ‘the darkness’ and ‘the land of forgetfulness’ (Ps.88:12), of which the psalms speak. Jesus called this place, or rather this condition of the soul after death, ‘the outer darkness’ (Matt.22:13) and ‘the Hell of fire’ (Matt.5:22).

One should note that the notion of Hell has been distorted by the coarse and material images in which it was clothed in Western medieval literature. One recalls Dante with

his detailed description of the torments and punishment which sinners undergo. Christian eschatology should be liberated from this imagery: the latter reflects a Catholic medieval approach to the *Novissima* with its 'pedagogy of fear' and its emphasis on the necessity of satisfaction and punishment. Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel depicts Christ hurling into the abyss all those who dared to oppose Him. 'This, to be sure, is not how I see Christ', says Archimandrite Sophrony (Sakharov). '...Christ, naturally, must be in the centre, but a different Christ more in keeping with the revelation that we have of Him: Christ immensely powerful with the power of unassuming love'. If God is love, He must be full of love even at the moment of the Last Judgment, even when He pronounces His sentence and condemns one to death.

For an Orthodox Christian, notions of Hell and eternal torments are inseparably linked with the mystery that is disclosed in the liturgical services of Holy Week and Easter, the mystery of Christ's descent into Hell and His liberation of those who were held there under the tyranny of evil and death. The Church teaches that, after His death on the Cross, Christ descended into the abyss in order to annihilate Hell and death, and destroy the horrendous kingdom of the Devil. Just as Christ had sanctified the Jordan, which was filled with human sin, by descending into its waters, by descending into Hell He illumined it entirely with the light of His presence. Unable to tolerate this holy invasion, Hell surrendered: 'Today Hell groans and cries aloud: It had been better for me, had I not accepted Mary's Son, for He has come to me and destroyed my power; He has shattered the gates of brass, and as God He has raised up the souls that once I held' ... In the words of St John Chrysostom, 'Hell was embittered when it met Thee face to face below. It was embittered, for it was rendered void. It was embittered, for it was mocked. It was embittered, for it was slain. It was embittered, for it was despoiled. It was embittered, for it was fettered'. This does not mean that in the wake of Christ's descent into it, Hell no longer exists. It does exist but is already sentenced to death.

### **'...A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH'**

Paradise is not a place, it is rather a state of the soul. Just as Hell is a suffering on account of the impossibility to love, Paradise is bliss that derives from the abundance of love and light. He who has been united to Christ participates completely and integrally in Paradise. The Greek word *paradeisos* signifies both the garden of Eden, where primordial man was placed, and the age to come, where those people who have been redeemed and saved by Christ taste eternal blessing. It can also be applied to the final stage of human history, when all creation will be transformed, and God will be 'all in all'. The blessing of Paradise is also called in Christian tradition 'the Kingdom of heaven', 'the life of the age to come', 'the eighth day', 'a new heaven', 'the heavenly Jerusalem'.

There are many descriptions of Paradise in hagiographic and patristic literature, some of them are very picturesque, and include trees, fruit, birds, villages, and so on.

Certain Byzantine saints, such as Andrew the Fool and Theodora, were 'caught up to the third heaven' (2 Cor.12:2), and, upon their return, described what they saw there. The authors of their lives, however, emphasize that human words can explain the experience of participation in the divine only to a limited degree. The concept of Paradise, as that of Hell, must be detached from the material images with which it is usually connected. Moreover, the idea of 'many rooms' (cf. John 14:2) ought not to be understood too literally: the 'rooms' are not places, but rather different degrees of closeness to God. As St Basil explains, 'some will be honoured by God with greater privileges, some with lesser, *for star differs from star in glory* (cf. 1 Cor.15:41). And as there are *many rooms* with the Father, some people will repose in a more supreme and exalted state, and some in a lower state'. According to St Symeon the New Theologian, all images relating to Paradise, be they 'rooms' or 'mansions', woods or fields, rivers or lakes, birds or flowers, are only different symbols of the blessing whose centre is none other than Christ Himself.

St Gregory of Nyssa advances similar idea of God as the sole and integral delight of the Kingdom of heaven. He himself substitutes all transient delights of mortal life: '...While we carry on our present life in many different ways, there are many things in which we participate, such as time, air, place, food and drink, clothing, sun, lamplight, and many other necessities of life, of which none is God. The blessedness which we await, however, does not need any of these, but the divine Nature will become everything for us and will replace everything, distributing itself appropriately for every need of that life...'

Thus, according to St Gregory and to certain other Fathers of the Church, the final outcome of our history is going to be glorious and magnificent. After the resurrection of all and the Last Judgment, everything will be centred around God, and nothing will remain outside Him. The whole cosmos will be changed and transformed, transfigured and illumined. God will be 'all in all', and Christ will reign in the souls of the people whom He has redeemed. This is the final victory of good over evil, Christ over Antichrist, light over darkness, Paradise over Hell. This is the final annihilation of death. 'Then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory'. 'O death, where is thy sting? O Hell, where is thy victory?.. But thanks be to God, Who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Cor.15:54-57).

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