

Who Lit the Fires of Hell?

A sermon on Matthew 5:21-37 by Nathan Nettleton, 12 February 2017

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Message

We make a devilish mistake when we project the origins of hell onto God. Jesus calls us to follow him into a new way of life that will save us from plunging into the hells of our own making.

Sermon

One of the many things that the new stage musical, *The Book of Mormon*, makes fun of is the Mormons' beliefs about hell. But actually, the Mormons beliefs about hell are not much different from what a lot of Christians believe. Hell has not featured much in my preaching to date, and I could perhaps be accused of avoiding the topic, but I think I have to say something about it tonight. In the version of the New Testament that I mostly use (NRSV), the word "hell" appears 13 times, and three of them were in tonight's gospel reading.

If you are one of those who firmly believes that every word of the Bible is to be taken literally in its plain and simple sense, then these references to hell are definitely bad news. They certainly are for me anyway. Maybe not you. But at face value, since I have been known to call someone a fool, I am "liable to the hell of fire", and since I haven't either plucked out my eyes or cut off my hands which have, on occasions, been known to participate in my sinful thoughts or sinful actions, I am in danger of my whole body being thrown into hell.

Do I believe it? Yes, and no. Sort of. I don't mean to be wishy washy here. It is just that when Jesus talks about hell, I don't think he is talking about what we usually think he is talking about. I believe in hell, alright. I've been there. And some of you have been unfortunate enough to have had a lot more experience of hell than me. I believe in it, because I've seen it. But I don't believe a lot of the things that are commonly believed about hell. And the main reason that I don't believe them is that I don't think there is any evidence that Jesus believed them either.

The common image of hell is a place of fiery torment, created by God for the eternal punishment of sinners who do not repent and get saved. It is a pit of fire into which an angry God sends people after they die to be tortured for the rest of eternity if they have failed to believe the right things and mend their ways. I don't believe in a God who is like that. I don't believe that hell is something God created or to which God deliberately sends anyone. And I don't think there is any evidence that Jesus believed in such a God or such a hell either.

That said, of the thirteen times that our English New Testament uses the word hell, eleven of them are in the words of Jesus (Matthew 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5). So what was he talking about? All eleven of them, including the three we heard tonight, translate the Greek word *Gehenna* (which translates the Hebrew: *Ben Hinnom*). So the crucial question in approaching this topic is not what do today's Christians think of when they hear the word "hell", but what did Jesus and his hearers think of when they heard the word "Gehenna"?

The first thing to know is that when the people of Jesus's day heard the name "Gehenna", they didn't hear it as a place that only existed in some other spiritual realm. They heard it as a place name that they knew. Gehenna was a valley south of Jerusalem. So when Jesus said you

could be thrown into the Gehenna fires, the image was local and concrete. They heard it more the way you would hear it if I said that you could be dumped in the sewerage farm at Werribee. You'd probably assume that I was meaning it as a metaphor and not just literally, but even so, the metaphor would begin with the image of a concrete locally known place.

If I spoke about the Werribee sewerage farm, certain unpleasant images would come to your mind. So what came to mind when the people of Jesus's day heard talk of Gehenna?

Some scholars think that Gehenna was a major rubbish tip where the garbage from the city was incinerated. If so, it would have been constantly smouldering, and you could understand how it developed as a metaphor for someplace hot, smokey, disgusting and scary that you didn't want to be. But actually, the evidence for the rubbish tip is not conclusive, and we probably shouldn't base too much on it.

There is something else for which the valley of Gehenna was infamous, and there is no historical dispute over this. It's clearly recorded in the Bible. The people of Jesus's day knew the stories of their past well, so when Jesus began talking about the fires of Gehenna these words from the prophet Jeremiah would have quickly come to mind:

In Gehenna (Hebrew: *Ben Hinnom*) they have built an altar called Topheth, so that they can sacrifice their sons and daughters in the fire. I, the LORD, did not command them to do this – it did not even enter my mind. And so, the time will come when it will no longer be called Topheth or Gehenna, but Slaughter Valley. They will bury their dead there until they run out of room to bury them. (Jeremiah 7:31-32)

Yep. Gehenna was so infamous as the centre of a cult of ritual child sacrifice that it became known as the Valley of Slaughter. Most of the cultures that surrounded ancient Israel practiced child sacrifice as part of their religions, and we know from this passage and numerous others that it happened among the Israelites too. There are clear biblical laws against it, but laws are made to eliminate things that are actually happening, not things that no one would ever think of. That's why we have laws against child abuse, but we don't have laws against eating jumbo jets. If there's a law against it, it was happening.

So it is one hell of a twist, if you'll pardon the pun, to try to make the image of the fires of Gehenna about a fire that God has created and that God incinerates people in. The fires of Gehenna incinerate human beings alright, but they are lit and fed by humans in direct contradiction to the revealed will of God. "I did not command them to do this," says the Lord, "it did not even enter my mind." The hell that Jesus speaks of is very much of human making. It is an extreme expression of the worst that human beings can do to one another. God hates it and does not send anyone there. People send people there. People light the fires of slaughter.

But of course, the people who lit the fires of Gehenna and sacrificed children in them didn't think of themselves or their actions as evil. They thought they were doing what was necessary to save the people. Although their actions were violent, they thought it was necessary violence to prevent much worse catastrophes.

That's the thing with most violence. Other people's violence always seems bad, but "our" violence always seems justified and sadly necessary. Whenever there seems to be a threat of

evil violence destroying us, we use some controlled and regulated form of violent force to stop it and restore the peace. Sometimes the force is applied by our police and our courts and prisons. Sometimes the force is applied by our security guards and protective services officers. Sometimes it is by our military forces. Sometimes it is by computer operated drones or missiles. But always we believe that it is the necessary violence that “our side” has to use to keep us safe from some greater and more evil violence. Always, someone else is being sacrificed to ensure our safety.

And that is no different at all to what the priests who sacrificed children by burning them on altars thought they were doing. They believed that these victims were demanded by angry gods and that only by sacrificing them could the community be saved from plunging into the self-destructive breakdown and violence apocalypse of everyone against everyone.

If you're sceptical about whether this had anything to do with what Jesus was talking about, look again at the context in which he says people would risk ending up in the Gehenna fires. It is explicitly about violence and sacrifices:

“You have heard that ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with someone, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult someone, you will be liable to the council (notice he’s talking about escalating levels of hostility and legal counter-force); and if you say, ‘You bloody idiot,’ you will be liable to the Gehenna fires. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrificial gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your sacrifice.”

It is all about hostility and murder and sacrifice, and how they escalate out of control, and when Jesus says that if you continue down that track you will end up in the Gehenna fires, he is not talking about anything God will do to you after you die. He is talking about what this pattern of behaviour can degenerate into right here in this life, just down the road. He is warning people that this ends up with people burning their own children on altars as sacrifices, or authorising deadly drone attacks in which hospitals and kindergartens full of burning children are dismissed as collateral damage, or locking up the children of asylum seekers in remote concentration camps and turning a deaf ear to their cries as they plunge into despair and mental illness.

He is warning us that the violence that we think of as necessarily employed in the service of good and keeping us safe is actually still part of the same horrific problem and not part of the solution. He is warning us that God sees our violent attempts to control the violence around us and says, “I did not command them to do this. It did not even enter my mind.”

Do you know why we so readily believe that God created a place called hell in which he punishes people by torturing them for eternity? Because that’s what we do. Because we are so convinced that official violence is the only answer that we convince ourselves that that is what God does too. God controls and punishes violence by using “good” violence too. That’s how we justify what we do. God does it, and God authorises us to do it too. “For God and country” we say, as we send off the troops. But we are lying to ourselves. “I did not command them to do this,” says the Lord, “it did not even enter my mind.”

Do I believe in hell? Damned right I do. I've been reading the reports from the Royal Commission into the sexual abuse of children in our state institutions. I've seen the reports from children who've lived in hell, many of them tortured by people in the same occupation group as me. There's a hell alright, and we created it. "I did not command them to do this," says the Lord, "it did not even enter my mind."

Do I believe in hell? Damned right I do. I've read reports of what happened to real people who faced the ovens of Auschwitz, Treblinka and Dachau or the conflagration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There's a hell alright, and we created it. "I did not command them to do this," says the Lord, "it did not even enter my mind."

Do I believe in hell? Damned right I do. I've been reading the reports of the psychological torture that is being done in our name in the offshore detention centres on Nauru and Manus Island to men, women and children whose only crime is to flee places of danger in the hope of sharing the quality of life we take for granted in this country. There's a hell alright, and we created it. "I did not command them to do this," says the Lord, "it did not even enter my mind."

But doesn't the creed say that Jesus descended into hell? Yes it does, and yes he does. Jesus descended into the hell we created. Jesus descended so far into our hell that he was tortured to death on a cross, in our name, at our hands; yet another victim of the hell we have ignited. Jesus descended into our hell precisely in order to break us out and lead us to a place of freedom and love and peace and reconciliation. Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice, the one sort of sacrifice that God does honour and applaud, the sacrifice of self in the service of others, in order that we might learn that there is a God-created alternative to the violent sacrificing of others that we constantly engage in in our misguided attempts to keep ourselves safe.

The full description of Jesus's alternative pathway is not spelled out in this extract from the sermon on the mount, but there are glimpses of it here. When there is anger and hostility, instead of continuing down the slippery slope to the Gehenna fires, put aside your sacrificial offerings and seek to be reconciled to one another; give up your legal case against your opponent and make peace instead. Pray for those who curse you and do good to those who persecute you. Love your enemies. Love your neighbours. Love yourselves.

Some people say that it is impossible to live by the sermon on the mount in today's world. That's certainly what the people who built Auschwitz said. That's what the people who bombed Hiroshima said. That's what the people who plan the drone strikes in Afghanistan say. That's what the people who ran Abu Graib and Guantanamo Bay and Manus Island say. That's what the people who call for tighter border controls and harsher sentencing say. But it is not what Jesus says. And to all of us who doubt that it could be possible here and now, Jesus simply says, "Follow me. You want to know if it is possible to live this teaching and turn our backs on all forms of so-called necessary violence? Follow me. Come and I'll show you what is possible and what it looks like. Follow me."