



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 15, 2019
EXODUS 32:7-14; PSALM 51:1-11; 1 TIMOTHY 1:12-17; LUKE 15:1-10

PLUMBING THE DEPTHS OF DIVINE LOVE



In 1853 The Reverend Frederick Dennison Maurice was a professor of English and theology at King's College, London, when he became embroiled in a controversy that eventually cost him his job and his position as an Anglican priest. What he said that was deemed heretical was that the depths of God's love surpassed the abyss of death. That hardly seems controversial to our modern ear, but in

his day, the Church leaned heavily on a doctrinal construct centered on the depravity of human beings, original sin, and eternal punishment as the consequences of one's earthly misdeeds.

FD Maurice, as he is known in theological circles, did not disagree with that doctrinal construct generally, and he adamantly refused to be categorized as a universalist,

because he believed in the existence of hell, which he defined as the experience some have in this life when separated from all sense of the loving presence of the divine, and that it can continue after our mortal death, as a soulful experience of loneliness, lostness, and emptiness.

His beef with that traditional doctrine of eternal damnation was two-pronged: first, he struggled with the proposition that punishment of the wicked must be eternal—that our notion of duration (eternal or everlasting) is a parameter of Time, and Time is part of the fabric of creation in which we exist, and is therefore limited.

And secondly, God exists outside the construct of Time, and therefore is not bound by it. So the abyss of God's love knows no bounds, and must be deeper than the abyss of "hell" (however we define that). It stands to reason, then, that God will never ever stop loving all that was ever created, even the one who strayed from that impulse of love, and became lost in the valley of the shadow of death.ⁱ

The bishops and board of the college were uncomfortable with this pervasive grace, and concluded it was a perversion of orthodoxy necessitating his being fired and, for a time, inhibited from practicing as a priest

altogether. In their decision are the echoes of pharisaic grumbling...

Their hostility toward Maurice was not singularly the result of this one disagreement. It is worth noting that Maurice was a founding leader of the Christian Socialist movement, advocating for men and women caught in the dark wheels of the industrial revolution and its laborious tilt in dangerous and deadly factories driving an economic machine in which they languished in poverty while the richest one percent waged on with insatiable and gluttonous appetites for accumulation of massive wealth.

Maurice wrote compellingly on the social ills of his country, but more importantly, he devoted a great deal of time and effort to establishing social agencies aimed at relieving some of the suffering and systemic blight that plagued the poor people of his land. He served as a chaplain in a workers' hospital, visiting the sick and injured there, and he established Queen's College School for girls—the first institution in the world to grant academic qualifications to women, and he founded the Working Men's College—the first adult education institution of its kind in Europe.

It is worth noting that The Reverend David Claiborne Garrett, who served this St. Mark's in the 1890s proclaimed the gospel in similar

terms and with a similar bent toward action aimed at relieving the suffering of those negatively impacted by the economic boom. Even while some grumbled about him.

What we might infer from all this is that both men fervently believed that if God's love is pervasive and never-ending for all people, then their love should be guided by similar arcs of inclusion and embrace, even in the face of persecution. And they invite us to reflect on our theology and how we express it in action in our own time.

Or to ask the theological question in a negative way: Who in this broken world would we consider so lost, so deprave, or even so wicked that they are not worthy of God's timeless search and rescue? Who deserves an eternal hell unworthy of ever being redeemed by God? Who is on your list of such lost souls? Hitler? Pol Pot? The human trafficker? The uncle who abused you? The spouse who betrayed you?

Is there anyone on your list whom you believe God should just forget about?

I am reminded of a poem that I came across several years ago. Written in the 19th Century by Robert Buchanan, it is entitled *The Ballad of Judas Iscariot*. I will post a link to the full poem at the end of my sermon manuscript, sharing a few verses here.ⁱⁱ

Much of the poem deals with the soul of Judas bearing his body on his back, searching for a place to bury it and his ignominious deed away from the sight of all people. His hellish experience is that he cannot find the proper place, and so he roams through the dark night of his cold, lonely experience.

*He wandered east, he wandered west,
And heard no human sound;
For months and years, in grief and tears,
He wandered round and round,*

*For months and years, in grief and tears,
He walked the silent night;
Then the soul of Judas Iscariot
Perceived a far-off light.*

*A far-off light across the waste,
As dim as dim might be,
That came and went like the lighthouse
gleam
On a black night at sea.*

*'Twas the soul of Judas Iscariot
Crawl'd to the distant gleam;
And the rain came down, and the rain was
blown
Against him with a scream.*

*'Twas the soul of Judas Iscariot,
Strange, and sad, and tall,
Stood all alone at dead of night
Before a lighted hall.*

*The Bridegroom in his robe of white
Sat at the table-head --
'Oh, who is that who moans without?'
The blessed Bridegroom said.*

*'Twas the soul of Judas Iscariot
Did hush itself and stand,
And saw the Bridegroom at the door
With a light in his hand.*

*The Bridegroom shaded his eyes and
look'd,
And his face was bright to see --
'What dost thou here at the Lord's Supper
With thy body's sins?' said he.*

*'Twas the soul of Judas Iscariot
Stood black, and sad, and bare --
'I have wandered many nights and days;
There is no light elsewhere.'*

*'Twas the wedding guests cried out within,
And their eyes were fierce and bright --
'Scourge the soul of Judas Iscariot
Away into the night!'*

*'Twas the Bridegroom stood at the open
door,
And beckon'd, smiling sweet;
'Twas the soul of Judas Iscariot
Stole in, and fell at his feet.*

*'The Holy Supper is spread within,
And the many candles shine,
And I have waited long for thee
Before I poured the wine!'*

*The supper wine is poured at last,
The lights burn bright and fair,
Iscariot washes the Bridegroom's feet,
And dries them with his hair.^[1]*

ⁱ To read his full treatise, see
http://anglicanhistory.org/maurice/jelf_letter1854.html

ⁱⁱ <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/buchanan/16.html>

Luke 15:1-10 [All the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So he told them this parable: "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. "Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."]