
Letters to a Young Episcopalian: Judgment

This letter is part of a series of fictional letters by Canon George Maxwell intended for Episcopalians young and old who wonder what it means to be faithful in the world today.

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Dear Anna,

You asked me whether I believe in hell.

We don't talk about hell very much, unless it's to describe a psychological condition, like when we say, "Hell is getting everything you want and still being unhappy," or to sidestep it, like when we say, "Yes, there's a hell, but in the end, there won't be anyone in it."

The problem is that the people who talk most about hell are the ones eagerly condemning others to it, while describing it as a literal place using images of fire and brimstone taken from medieval folklore.

Rowan Williams offers a more compelling image when he describes hell as "God eternally knocking on a closed door that we are struggling to hold shut." Most of us spend a lifetime hiding things from ourselves – and from others. Coming completely clean is a painful process; yet, we believe that pure love demands absolute truth.

George Herbert imagines this process of self-disclosure in his poem, "Love." "Love bade me welcome," he says, "yet my soul drew back." The poem continues,

*let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit down and eat.*

C. S. Lewis reveals the terror of this process in his book, *The Great Divorce*. He creates a cast of characters so bound by their own suspicions and selfishness that they continually refuse to enter Heaven to avoid having to give up their self-deceptions. It's comic until we find the courage to see ourselves in them.

So, yes, I believe in hell, not as a place but as a state of being. We have been given the choice to live there in this life, and I fear we will be given the choice to stay there in the next. That's why repentance plays a leading role in our community life, and why I pray, as the Great Litany puts it, that I will be delivered "from dying suddenly and unprepared" (BCP, p. 149).

I also hope and trust that, while there is a hell, in the end, there won't be anyone in it!

Your affectionate uncle,
Ames

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