

The Four Last Things, II

Dante's misgivings about entering into hell are laid to rest by the firm guidance of Virgil. He has received the courage to go down – courage obtained for him by the Lady Most Compassionate in heaven, and also he is helped by St. Lucy.

He descends first of all for understanding, because he, like most of us, is filled with illusions, misunderstandings, and errors. He cannot imagine that the love of God has anything to do with hell even though he saw with his own eyes its gate, but one of the things he must grasp in order to overcome his own sin is that love has everything to do with hell.

As Dante passes through that terrible gate, he only begins to conceive how the damned came to be in that horrible place. For that which wings us up to heaven or sinks us like a lead weight into the inferno, is what we choose to love. If I choose this world against the Holy Trinity, then that means I believe that I have the power and the wisdom to lay hold of the evil that I love and draw it near my breast as a precious treasure, as if *it* were the ultimate blessing. If I do that, then I will need a hell prepared for my reception. For I myself will be my hell.

When he and Virgil pass through the gate to the inferno, they are in an area just as wide as the gate, maybe even far wider. They cannot see how far it goes. In fact they can hardly see at all. That is, Dante expresses hell as a number of circles starting very wide, but as he goes deeper, they become more and more narrow, more cramped, more crowded. Revelation does not teach this, but it does stand to reason that hell might take the shape of sin.

That is, every sinner knows by bitter experience that whatever pleasure there was at the beginning of the practice of vice – and sometimes there is enormous, wide pleasure – there is equally an inexorable law of diminishing returns. The more the sinner engages in the favorite sin, the less pleasure, the more insatiable is the ravenous she-wolf who blocks the path to the mountain of God. If she is fed only once, her appetite explodes in desire, and she can never be satisfied, and never filled.

Heaven as we shall see is shaped the opposite. It begins with an extremely narrow gate, but the more you go up, the more the levels of heaven become spacious and expansive. This too is not revelation, but does express if you will, the shape of virtue. For even Aristotle knew as a pagan that the more virtuous a man becomes the more he enjoys virtuous actions. And in the Christian dispensation, the more we surrender ourselves to God, and sever the ties to what is low and base, the greater the joy, until it gets to the point that we cannot stand the world, even in all its beauty and delight, but find God to be all beauty and all delight.

Back then to the first circle, Dante is surprised because he sees hardly anything. There is no sky; there are no heavens above nor stars, just unrelenting darkness. But he listens, and the sounds going into his ears are the sounds of damnation.

Here sighs and wails and shrieks of very sort reverberated in the starless air, so that a first it made me weep to hear. In divers tongues, in accents horrible, with groans of agony and screams of rage, in voices weak and shrill, with sounds of blows, a ceaseless tumult's everlasting roar seethe round about that timeless blackened air, as sand is tossed before the whirlwind's blast. I asked him with my head in horror bound: O master, tell me what is this I hear, and who are these so overcome by grief?

He answered me: this miserable lot befalls the woe-begotten souls of those who lived their lives with neither praise nor blame. Commingled with them here that wretched choir of angels stand, who selfishly refused to keep their faith with God, or to rebel. Heaven expelled them, not to be less fair; yet deep hell refuses to receive them.

And I asked him, O master, what can be the grief that makes them thus lament so bitterly? He answered: I will tell you very briefly. These have no hope of death; existence here is so degraded and obscure, that they are envious of any other lot. The world above has put them out of mind; mercy and justice scorn them both alike. We won't discuss them. Look, and pass them by.

These are the souls of the indifferent, the souls who cared for nothing, who believed in nothing, who were for nothing, who were against nothing. I won't go into the details of their punishment because these are too graphic for the children to hear. But in the midst of the description, three things stand out. One is the statement "These abject cowards who had never lived..." This cowardice both heaven and hell despise, for they rejected life above, and below, death rejects them.

A second statement is the sound of blows. When you ask most people “What does the devil want?” You often get the answer, “Your soul.” But this is not true. The devils despise our souls and hate them, they don’t want them. They hate each other; they hate themselves. And so, part of the living death of the inferno is eternal conflict, eternal strife, and the absolute opposite of peace.

The third statement that stands out was how Dante perceived those whom he had known on this earth. "When beheld there some that I had known, I saw, and knew at once, the *shade* of him who basely made the great renunciation." They are a shade, a shadow of what they once were. How can this be?

St. Thomas points out that our Blessed Lord speaks of hell under three symbols; first, that of punishment. Our Lord calls this everlasting punishment (Mt. 25:46). Second, He speaks of destruction. “Fear him who is able to destroy both body and soul in hell.” (Mt. 10:28) Third, He speaks of privation, exclusion, or banishment into “the darkness outside” as in the parables of the man without a wedding garment or of the wise and foolish virgins.

When we try to combine all three, we have some difficulty since destruction to us means annihilation so that nothing is left. But it is not possible to annihilate the human soul. The human soul is immortal. Think instead of destruction as being the emergence of something else. Like the fossilized corpses of the victims of the volcano at Pompeii, we can see that this is no longer a man, but we can recognize immediately that it once was a man, and now is something different. This was a woman, this was a dog.

You will remember that in the parable, the saved go to a place that is prepared for them. But the damned go to a place that was never made for human beings at all. To enter heaven is to become more human than you ever succeeded at here on earth; to enter hell is to be banished, exiled from humanity. What is cast into hell is not a man; it is the remains of a man, it is the husk of what is left of a man, after a life of un-repentant sin.