

## The Four Last Things, XII

We now descend into the last and deepest circle of the inferno, which is the circle of treachery – the place for those who betrayed their friends and loved ones for things like money or power.

Dante and Virgil make their way with difficulty, not because of heat and flames and monstrous creatures, but they walk against a cold, icy hurricane of wind, in a forlorn icy wilderness. The nature of the treacherous is that of cold malice aforethought. The denizens of the 9<sup>th</sup> circle planned their betrayal, and that planning is called malice.

Of the many characters we meet down there, I'll just focus on two; the first man in the history of the Church to have left the priesthood, and the other is Lucifer.

Judas Iscariot left the priesthood to pursue his full betrayal of His Lord and Savior. He didn't do it all at once; it was in stages. There is much evidence from tradition that he was given many opportunities for repentance after he betrayed the Lord, to turn back, to try again. St. Gregory the Great says Judas was given ten of these by the Lord Himself.

What if he had returned to the priesthood? Well things wouldn't go on just as they had – there would be changes – for example it is unlikely that St. Peter would have allowed him to continue with being in charge of the money. With his return, there would have been great joy and feasting, yet likely he would have spent the rest of his life not as a parish priest say, but as a penitent; as a contemplative. So the apostles and disciples tried to get him to come back, but to no avail. And note, there is no evidence that Judas sought out Our Lady. She would have made all the difference.

So it is that the elder brother and the father of the prodigal son did not journey to the far country to have a beer with him, rather, they waited in anguish for his return. And when the woman caught in adultery was addressed by Our Lord, He didn't say, "Let's do lunch!" He said "Go and sin no more." Christ was accused with eating and drinking with sinners, but He ate with them for the purpose of getting them back to grace, as these dinners were more like state dinners which served a political purpose. He drank with them to get them to return to the Father. He was not socializing with them.

In the middle ages, if a man left the priesthood, or tried to, he was punished severely. Monasteries then also functioned as prisons, and an apostate priest was whipped. This sounds strange to us in our times. When we read for example of St. John of the Cross being imprisoned and whipped by friars of his own order, we are surprised to even imagine the Church being able to punish recalcitrant priests. In our times the secular power has all the cards, and we have lost our monasteries on the whole, and so a priest today can freely abandon one of the greatest possible gifts that God could give a man, and go where he pleases and live where he wants with little or no consequence. It may sound harsh, but consider for a moment what Our Lord said to Judas; “Go and do what you must do.” The handwriting was on the wall. Judas was intent and none could stop him. We may say the same to a priest in our day who seeks to abandon his sacred duty.

If the priest still lives, there is yet a chance he could come back. If he pursues laicization and is granted it, there is no chance, and the eternal die is cast. Judas took his own life, which Dante takes as a kind of double betrayal, and thus has him in the lowest level of hell.

Judas has for an eternal companion Lucifer, Satan, Dis, Beelzebub – Dante throws every name in the book at the Devil. That last, one, Beelzebub, is quite the insult, as it means a Lord of Flies.

As ugly as he was once beautiful, Lucifer is the wretched, useless emperor of hell, an emperor of nothing, whose tremendous size stands in contrast to his very limited powers, as he is locked eternally in ice. He has three mouths that consume the arch-traitors, and their gore mixes with his tears, which gush from his three sets of eyes like those of a gigantic spider. He has three faces – each with a different color – that parody the doctrine of the Holy Trinity; the three complete Persons in one divine nature; the Divine Power, the Highest Wisdom and the Primal Love that created the Gates of Hell, and by extension, the entire realm of damnation.

Not a word is spoken in this circle, unless by Dante and Virgil. Satan is shown to be an anti-Trinity and an anti-Christ. Consider the humility of Christ, the Word of God, who at His birth was but an infant, literally a speechless babe. He whose hand strewed the heavens with the stars was wrapped tight in swaddling clothes. Yet in that manger lay true power, true goodness, and the true light of the world that enlightens every man.

So if Christ became small, then Satan must be big, like an overgrown cave troll. If Christ could not move His hands, then Satan must flap his wings. If Christ is the Word, then Satan must be wordless. If the Most Holy Trinity is a communion of love, then Satan must embody an anti-communion of hatred. If the Lord instituted the Eucharist to be eaten, then Satan eats too, but only to chew forever without any nourishment. If God is the life of our life, then Satan must possess a parody of life, the motion of a machine, utterly predictable and utterly in vain.

Satan does not speak, but he does something that tells us all we need to know. He flaps his wings while locked in the ice. With the predictability of a robot, it is as though he says “I arise, by my power.” This is the old lie he fed to Eve, “You shall be as gods.” The irony is that if he stopped flapping his wings, then the hurricane of icy wind would stop and the river Cocytus that provides the water would melt and he would be free. But the very action we most associate with freedom – the soaring flight of a bird – is made impossible by his actions. He is encased by his own pride, his own lies, and his own evil perversion of freedom. This is the reality of hell – all those in it are there by their own actions, their own lies, and remain there by the same.

After seeing this, Dante and Virgil grab hold of the Devil’s scruffy hide and climb down on it, between the skin and the ice, and all at once they turn around and seem to be climbing up the opposite direction. Virgil explains that they have passed through the center of the earth.

They follow a little stream of water and continue up; the stench and fumes and fire replaced by the cool, fresh night air, and the infernal noises and screams are far behind them replaced with the sound of the water tumbling over the stones in the little brook. And Dante says, “And caring not for rest, we mounted upward, he first and I behind, until I saw some of those lovely gems that heaven wears, through a round opening far above our heads: Thence we came forth, again to see the stars.”