

The Four Last Things, VII

Not until the 19c did any Christian body make universal salvation its official teaching. The first one to do so emerged as the Unitarian Universalist Association; universalism being the belief that somehow, no one will go to hell. This belief has different flavors; but at the heart of all universalism is not so much a concern with all men being united with God, but rather that all men will be united with each other. Heaven is where you go to meet one another rather than union with God.

Part of the reason why universalism attracts is because of revulsion. Hell is ugly and horrible, and many simply cannot reconcile that with God. Now if someone asked me if I believed in eternal damnation I will not hesitate to say “Yes, I do.” And my reasons for this belief are not just because it is in the Creed, not just because it is all over Sacred Scripture, not just because the Holy Catholic Church teaches it, but also because I have eyes to see. Like Michael McClymond wrote recently, “I don’t need to hypothesize a world in which human pride and stubbornness cause people to turn away from God’s gracious offer of mercy in Christ Jesus. This is the world I live in. This is what I see happening every day.”

Universalists utterly reject the *Divine Comedy* of course, clinging to the fact that evil has no power to hold us, thanks to our Redeemer. “Yes” I imagine Dante saying, “You’re right. It does not have the power to hold us. And then he would add “But we have power to hold on to evil.”

We are not merely imperfect creatures who need to be improved, as St. John Henry Newman said, we are rebels who must lay down our arms. But to surrender, to give up a self-will inflamed and swollen with years of usurpation and defiance...that is a kind of death. We all remember this self-will as it was in childhood; you see it in very young children; the bitter, prolonged rage at every thwarting, the burst of passionate tears, the devilish desire to inflict harm on a sibling rather than give in. Hence the necessity of dying daily; but however often we think we have broken the rebellious self we shall still find it alive and well. Newman wrote,

But the human spirit will not even begin to try to surrender self-will as long as all seems well with it. Error and sin have this property; the deeper they are the less their victim suspects their existence; they are evil with a mask on.

But pain is unmasked, unmistakable evil; everyone knows that something is wrong when he is being hurt. Pain is immediately recognizable evil and evil is impossible to ignore. We can rest contentedly in our sins and in our stupidities; and anyone who has seen a glutton shoveling down the most exquisite foods as if they did not know what they were eating will admit that we can ignore even pleasure. But pain will insist upon being attended to. God may whisper to us in our pleasures, and speak to us in our consciences, but He shouts in our pains. Pain is a megaphone to rouse a deaf world.

And so Dante, who still has not learned his lessons well, must go deeper into the inferno, into the fourth circle of it, and see the punishment of the avaricious. He must hear the megaphone. Dante had sorrow for the lustful, and disdain for the gluttonous, but hasn't quite seen why their punishment must be eternal. So he goes deeper and sees a different kind of lust – not for food or sexual pleasure this time – but lust for material gain. This is the circle of the greedy. He is surprised at what he sees.

A screaming crowd pushing heavy weights by strength of chest. They came together with a shock; and there they wheeled about, shouting to one another, "Why do you squander? Why do you hoard?" Along the gloomy circle they returned on either hand, shouting their words of shame till at the opposite point they met again.

The avaricious are so physically squalid that they are unrecognizable to the travelers. But avarice has two sides to it. One side pushing the weights has closed fists, signifying the amassing of wealth, and the other open, signifying prodigality, or spending without measure. These two groups punish and insult one another in the fourth circle.

Greed is a common vice in our times, and is excused without limit. Is this not a strange thing? If a man has an apartment stacked to the ceiling with old newspapers, we call him crazy. If a woman has her trailer full of cats, we call her nuts. But when people hoard so much money that they impoverish an entire city, they get on the cover of *Fortune* magazine as role models. Or when they lavish money and gifts on politicians and celebrities, as a way to pursue the grotesque vice of molestation, they get their picture taken with the Clintons.

It was much the same in Dante's time. He knows that avarice is the root of all evils (sometimes avarice is translated as money, 1 Tim. 6:10), and he has experienced in his life the avarice which caused ethical and political corruption in his beloved Florence. But what changes him above all is when he notices that among the hoarders and profligates, "These men have no hair on their heads," and Virgil informs him that they were clerics – even cardinals and popes, "among whom avarice grows as it will."

He felt sorry for Francesca in the first circle, and felt the same for Ciacco, who was a glutton in the third circle, but now he is angry because of the avarice of cardinals and popes, for the harm they inflicted on Our Lord, on the Church, and to his city. St. John Henry Newman points out that vice of avarice is all along a problem of idolatry.

They do not understand that they are called to be strangers and pilgrims upon the earth, and that their worldly lot and worldly goods are a sort of accident of their existence, and that they really have no property, though human law guarantees property to them. Accordingly, they set their heart upon their goods be they great or little, not without a sense of religion the while, but still idolatrously. This is their fault, an identifying of God with this world, and therefore an idolatry towards this world; and so they are rid of the trouble of looking out for their God, for they think they have found Him in the goods of this world.

Dante is beginning to lose his sentimental views, and beginning to grasp Divine justice. He, like we do, had the strange illusion that time cancels sin. That after a period of time the sin is gone, or made up for. Certainly we can all relate to laughing about a past fault or mistake.

But mere time does nothing either to the fact or the guilt of sin. The guilt is not washed away by time; it is washed away by the Precious Blood of Christ. If we have repented for those old sins, then we should be humble about it and remember the price of our forgiveness.

And as to the fact of sin, is there anything that cancels it? All time is eternally present to God. Is it not possible that He can see your cruelty to that animal, that act of cowardice when you were young; that act of insolence to your parents; that shameful, secret impurity? Surely salvation consists not in the cancelling of these moments but in their being assumed by Christ in perfect humility that bore an eternity of shame in the Garden of Gethsemane.