

Is God a soft touch? Does Hell actually exist?

I think you may have realised by now that I am quite a fan of Pope Francis. And this Year of Mercy that we are still enjoying is so powerful and important.

But what this Year of Mercy definitely does not mean is that God is a soft touch. Pope Francis is trying to change the image of the Church, turning the Church into that field hospital for the wounded rather than a fortress that shuts itself off from the rest of the world.

The Year of Mercy does not mean that God is a soft touch, an easy-going guy who is not that fussed about morality and right-living. He does understand our sin and our waywardness. He does have sympathy and compassion beyond all our imagining.

But the bad things we do and the good things we don't do still hurt him at a very deep level. Sin is still sin. God's mercy does not cancel out the pain that we cause, as if by magic.

In the rich man's torment in Hades, he looked up and saw Abraham a long way off with Lazarus in his bosom. So he cried out, 'Father Abraham, pity me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames'.

Lying on ivory beds...esconced so snugly..., oblivious of the poverty and pain around us, does not go unnoticed. What goes around, comes around, what Buddhists call 'Karma'. Our actions and our attitudes do have consequences.

Hell is real and many people are in it already. Many people know the agony of these flames. The dark side is never far away. Despair and death are never far away.

And, what's more, between the heavenly realm of Abraham and the fiery hell of the rich man a great gulf has been fixed, to stop anyone crossing from our side to yours, and to stop any one crossing from your side to ours.

So what hope is there for sinful human beings? How do we cross that great gulf? How do we get from the agony of despair and impotence to the cooling waters of that heavenly realm?

The only person who can cross that gulf is God Himself. This is what Jesus does. He enters the depths. From the bosom of the Father he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, enduring the darkness of Gethsemane, the desolation of the Cross and the complete negation of Hell. And from that darkness, desolation and negation, and **only** from that darkness, desolation and negation, God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above all names.

This is what it means to *fight the good fight of the faith and win for yourself the eternal life to which you were called*, to go to with Jesus into the depths, in the strength of Jesus to embrace that darkness desolation and negation, to put yourself entirely into the hands of God, to allow him to exalt and raise you up, to cross the gulf from self-absorption to self-giving, to know that God's mercy and forgiveness is only achieved through the death of his only Son.

O God, who manifest your almighty power above all by pardoning and showing mercy, bestow, we pray, your grace abundantly upon us and make those hastening to attain your promises, heirs to the treasures of heaven, through Christ our Lord.

