

IKEA at the weekend; the person in front of you at the checkout queue at Beddington ASDA pretty much any time. Them, sat in your pew. The driver who zooms into the last parking space in front of you, every single person who drives past without letting you turn off or onto the Croydon Road; tailgaters and twenty years of van drivers demolishing the fence at the front of the Rectory. Clumps of young people hanging round the park, gangs of retired people hogging the benches in the park; the person sitting behind you on the bus who coughs onto your neck, whoever it is whose dog's poo I trod in when I first walked in Beddington park. That man eating a burger on the Tube, with his mouth open. Call centres, the inventor of the auto dialled PPI claim call, mobile phone conversations at the checkout, in a railway carriage or cinema. Queue jumpers and in fact while we're at it, everybody in the queue in front of you, who, when they've been served are probably then going to go out into the street and sway from side to side of the pavement walking really slowly in front of you. The person paying 6 months worth of complex bills at the single open counter at the bank. The neighbours having a Saturday night party just loud enough to keep you awake but quiet enough that only you are bothered by it. Waiters who avoid your eye when you want to pay the bill. Anybody who has ever used a selfie stick. The committee member with a 10 point list just waiting for the Chair to say 'any other business'. Whoever it is who is now making cars with non-functioning indicators. That child loudly sucking through a straw at the end of the drink. Whassisname checking his smartphone in the middle of your conversation. Those who go through life eating vast quantities of anything they like and never put on weight; people who feed squirrels. Those who are always late and those who are habitually early. Bailiffs, estate agents, journalists, politicians, Rectors, vicars, bishops, St Paul, Piers Morgan, Peter Stringfellow, Justin Bieber, Justin Welby, Katie Hopkins, Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Alan Titchmarsh, Theresa May. And people like that. All the evidence you ever needed, that, yes indeed: Hell is other people. Oh yes, Hell is other people. Packed to the rafters with 'em, bursting at the seams.

Admittedly, 'hell is other people' is Sartre on an existential quest not a Christian doctrine, but it might as well be. With just the tiniest of adjustments, add just one tiny wafer-thin word and I'm sure it'll come swiftly into faith focus. Hell is other people. And Hell is *for* other people.

It's rarely stated quite as starkly as that, of course, but for many of our brothers and sisters in faith, we're in and you're out is the very lifeblood that courses through the veins of our faith. However it is expressed- whether you need to give yourself to Jesus, assent to the ancient creeds or sign on the line, the only way to that you're

bundled up in the sheaf when the reaping angel swings his scythe is to be one of the select, or should that be 'elect' few.

We're in the boat; you're not. That's what church is all about. Hell is for other people.

There is another side of this coin however, one that as far as I know, never made it onto the nib of Sartre's pen, one that is Christian top to bottom though much less evident in our proclamation. Hell is other people. And Heaven is other people too.

Heaven is for other people. And here's the *really* worrying bit, people *who are nothing like us*. Despite the tribal puritanical mess we've made in the church these 2000 odd years since the first Easter day, despite our deep set desire to batten down the hatches, fence in the faith and repel all boarders of the boat, doesn't that sound hand on heart what it's really all about? Heaven is other people and Heaven is for other people.

Ride this train of thought to the end of the line and you arrive at the really rather beautiful Christian position known as 'universalism'. Sounds pretty dramatically bigscreen IMAX Dolby surround sound: you like it already. Universalism

Here is universalism in a nutshell. Hell is a real place. But it's empty. Why? Because everybody's in heaven. And we mean *everybody*, even the people who spent their time on earth being as vile, unpleasant and repulsive as it's possible to be. Because, in the end, everybody will turn to Christ. Obviously, it's better if you do it now, but when you pop your clogs, you can still take the plunge: God will not give up till you have said, 'yes!'

So, when confronted in the afterlife with that heaven or hell choice, would anyone choose hell? Nobody's that stupid. Of course, the theologians who thought that never had the chance to see Ant and Dec's Saturday Night Takeaway. Or parliamentary debates on Brexit. But still, even taking that into account, surely nobody's that stupid. Not even Katie Hopkins.

So, Universalism. A belief that is supremely optimistic about both God and humanity. As such it's an extremely attractive proposition.

But I suspect there's a part of many of us that's shuffling uncomfortably in our seat, really not quite happy about what is being said, that is just building up the courage to stand up and say 'I don't think so'.

When I first heard someone suggest that, yes, hell does exist, but it's empty, I laughed. I laughed at the very absurdity of the idea. It's a very nice idea, it ties in well with all this stuff about God is love, but then that isn't what the Bible's about is it, nevermind all those millennia of Christian tradition? Doesn't the Bible talk incessantly about God's chosen people? Doesn't Jesus talk about separating out wheat from weeds, wise virgins from foolish virgins, good fish from bad fish. Are you saying that the last judgement is going to be all a formality because when it comes to the livestock take it's all sheep and no goats?

If that is the case, then, why am I here? Why bother coming to church at all? Why bother struggling with temptation, trying to follow Jesus, striving to do the right thing? If we all get to heaven regardless, why bother at all? Well good question. One Christians have been grappling with since at least St Paul.

Well, surely you don't come here because you think that will buy you into heaven do you? Each eucharist/evensong a Nectar point: get enough and there's your passport past the pearly gates? Even if that might be a comforting thought, I don't think that's why you started coming here.

Yes, we have all sorts of running round screaming loud all at the same time motivations for much that we do, but I think you started coming here because, whether you knew it or not, you were falling in love. And you're still in love even if sometimes it feels rather like love is after a decade of being together and they still haven't learned the right way to squeeze the toothpaste. You're not in love because of what you get from the other person: that's not love, that's an economic transaction.

So you're here not because of what you'll get if you come or what you'll miss if you don't.

You're here because you're in love.

With Jesus. And you know what. It's reciprocated.

In the second letter to Timothy you can read the following lines:

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*

Do we really think St Paul ran that race for the prize? Do we sum him up in his life and mission as, well, a rather sophisticated donkey straining for a carrot and running from the stick?

Or do we say, that St Paul was head over heels with love for the Saviour who had thrown him from his horse all those years ago on the road to Damascus and nothing would now stop that love?

*“not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing”*

And whose heart has not at some point ached with that longing?

God overflows with love for us. He loved us before we did, said or believed anything. He does not love us because of what we do, say or believe. And He will love us whatever we do, say or believe. That Divine love loved us first. And that love will not stop loving us, even beyond death. Every one of us. All of us.