

But if hell is an awful possibility, heaven is where God wants us to be. The Archbishop of York spoke about the wonderful and amazing grace of God. We needn't anxiously hope that on judgement day our good deeds will outnumber our sins – they probably won't. But our sins won't condemn us nevertheless, for if we come in humility, faith and penitence, God will forgive us. That's what the Gospel, the Good News, is all about. As Isaiah prophesied, 'Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow'. We shall be eternally separated from God only if we refuse to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and insist on enthroning ourselves at the centre of our own personal universe. In the end only four words will be spoken: 'Thy will be done'. Spoken by God to us, they will have an awful finality. But if we say those words to God, the gates of glory will be flung wide open. According to Jesus, once inside we shall find ourselves in the middle of a swinging party where everyone is having a wonderful time – except that Time won't exist, of course.

The Teaching of Jesus

Session 5

In this fifth and final session, we consider Jesus' teaching about human nature. We usually turn first to the Gospels, and perhaps you'd like to switch off for a few moments and read two passages. First, St Mark chapter seven, verses 14 to 23 and then St Luke chapter eleven, verses 9 to 12. That's Mark seven, 14 to 23, and Luke eleven, 9 to 12.

'You then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children.' Jesus is very unsentimental about human nature. What do our participants make of this? First, James Dunn, then Pauline Webb and Steve Chalke.

JD: Jesus, I think, is recognising something here which Christianity has always recognised, and its Jewish roots as well, the Fall in Genesis 3, that the human being has a tendency to turn in upon himself in selfish acquisition; in attempt to dominate others, and so on. So it's that tendency in humanity that Jesus is probably thinking of there. That we have to actually deliberately resist the temptation to think of ourselves first.

PW: Jesus was realistic about human nature, but I think the phrase he wouldn't agree with would be, 'You can't change human nature.' I think he would say you can. I think, but he saw that happen, I mean, he made it happen, didn't he, to people like Zaccheus, people like that, and I think, yes, he was pessimistic about human nature but he was optimistic about what the grace of God can do with it.

SC: Jesus is very realistic about human nature – the Bible's very realistic about human nature. It doesn't just tell us *how* to live, though it has *much* to say about how to live – it tells us at the heart of life what we most need is forgiveness. And what we need after that is empowerment and at the heart of the Bible is that message: that God forgives us and then fills us with his Spirit to equip us to be the kind of people that God longs for us to be.

Did Jesus give us a blueprint for relationships? Can we find, in the teaching of Jesus, a clear pattern for marriage, family life and life in the community?

DH: The New Testament is always setting before us something of the ideals and the standards, but equally being very realistic about very often where people actually find themselves. And the whole point is that Jesus is there with and alongside those whose lives have in various ways broken down; come unstuck; are disordered. And I think that's – again holding those two things together – is really quite important to the life of the Church at the present time.

SC: We do find very clear teaching about all of those issues and many others in Scripture, but we have to work that teaching through carefully. Instead of leaping on one verse and saying, 'Ah, every situation I apply this verse!' – take the issue of living together. It's clear that Jesus taught, the Bible teaches, that marriage is God's best. A permanent relationship that is sanctioned, not just by the two individuals that enter into it, but by the whole of society. However, a couple become Christians, they are living together, they've got two children and a new child on the way – what does the Church say to that couple? Do they say, 'We've got to live apart?'. What does that do to the children in this new relationship? What does it do to this young child that's not yet born? To be born into that insecurity and not to have a mum and dad? So what we have to do is take the statements of Scripture about parenting and childhood and security, along with the statements that God makes about marriage and set them again alongside Jesus' compassion and ask ourselves, 'How do we act in this particular case?' It's tough. It's what Jesus did. And it's what he calls the Church to do.

JD: He gives a basic blueprint which is, 'Love God with all your heart, and your neighbour as yourself' and that's – he reduces all the commands to those two. I think what we have here is an ideal, which Jesus states, and he states it as firmly and forcefully as possible, but it is recognised straightaway by his disciples and – including Paul among his disciples at this point – that in particular situations the ideal will be compromised.

So what is sin? And are all sins equal in God's eyes, or are some worse than others?

DH: A sin is a turning away from God and his ways. In the medieval church there was quite a league table and I think the moral theologians did distinguish between what were called mortal and venial sins but, for my own