

Hellfire, brimstone and the eternal flames of damnation lie in wait.

I'm joking of course. It's probably not the first time however in the past 150 years when the pulpit of this church has been used to say those words. Many a preacher has waved a disapproving finger over his or her congregation and warned them that if they don't repent of their ways immediately then the devils with their pitchforks and burning coals are all that they have to look forward to.

Much of this imagery and language stem from this single Bible reading we have just heard, the talk of separating the wheat from the weeds, an agricultural image, and of consigning the worthless weeds to the flames.

Now of course when we hear this imagery we typically think it refers to the flames of hell. It has often been claimed that the weeds are the bad people who are burned up by way of punishment, while the wheat are the good people who go to a nice safe place. This passage has been cited again and again therefore as a way to persuade people to be good. As incentives go, it is logical, but I would argue it is not very Christian.

Some of you may remember a pilgrimage we did as a community to the little church at Chaldon near here, where there is a huge wall painting about 800 years old that survives intact on the far wall. It is full of pictures of Beelzebub and all his little wizards poking and prodding at people over the flames. Very graphic and rather good old-fashioned fun, but clearly intended to be absolutely terrifying.

Scared? Well you shouldn't be, because that is not what this particular passage means. The words that have spawned countless paintings and sermons, and have given us the image of the devil with his pitchfork, have very little to do with punishment and the afterlife.

When Jesus talks about fire, the audience at the time would not automatically have made the connection that we might make, between fire and the afterlife. The Old Testament doesn't go into what the afterlife was like, it simply describes it a few times with the Hebrew word 'sheol' without going into any detail. Our understanding of this as punishment for our sins might seem obvious to us, but it is not the original context for this particular Bible reading.

The early church did not see fire in the same way that we do. Rather the fire that appears in the bible is of a different sort, it is God's energy at work, God's energy that enlivens and enlightens, that powers and renews. I preach about light and the divine fire quite a lot, and I think it is one of the most powerful symbols of the Christian and Jewish faiths, with an element in Islam too.

So I would read this passage alongside similar passages in the Bible. There is a closely related saying to this, about separating the wheat from the chaff and burning the chaff. That metaphor is in fact used by John the Baptist, who talks about it in the same breath that he talks about baptism. And as you might know the word and concept of baptism actually comes from a very simple concept that we all

understand and participate in ourselves. Baptism means simply 'to wash' in the original text, the word baptizo could be used to describe the simple mundane task of getting clean, and could also be used in slightly more formal contexts such as washing the hands ritually before a meal. Washing is not a type of punishment. It is instead a way of removing dirt, a way of improving yourself. Cleaning away your impurities.

This then is a much better way to understand what this particular Bible reading means. The separation of the wheat from the weeds is not about punishing but about purifying. It is not about separating the good people and the bad people, but rather about helping us separate the good and the bad in each of our own lives, the causes of sin. It actually says 'causes of sin' in our reading. And the second phrase here is translated as 'all evildoers' but you could translate the Greek as 'those things that commit evil' Certainly a cause of sin isn't referring to a human being but a concept.

This is not just a modern, liberal, Anglican way of saying 'well it's all OK because nobody will be punished and we all end up in heaven anyway'.

And some of the first bible commentators actually understood it in the way I am explaining here. Origen in the 3rd century, Athenagoras in the 2nd century and Gregory of Nyssa in the 4th century all took this parable all interpreted this parable much as I am doing now in the 21st century. They all say that the weeds and the good wheat are actually representative of 'opinions' or 'thoughts' or in some cases 'sayings' or 'impulses of the soul'. This idea of punishment and flames representing people being burned in hell is a different concept, a later idea developed from the 11th century onwards, and shockingly used to justify burning heretics. Unlearn it.

The fire is not metaphorical punishment but rather it is actually the sort of fire we already know. It is fire that destroys the physical world, fire that strips us of all our material possessions and allows us to focus on spiritual matters. I suggest that this is the flame of Pentecost that Luke describes in the Acts of the Apostles.

As far as we can tell from the Bible, the early church did not attempt to get people to join the church by threatening them with hell and damnation. There are lots of missionary encounters in the Acts of the Apostles, but none of them attempt to scare people into believing. People were not encouraged to join the new church at the point of a pitchfork, prodded into believing in order to save themselves from a terrible fate.

We don't want people to come to church because they are frightened. But rather because they feel accepted rather than judged, restored rather than condemned, cleansed and purified rather than prodded, tortured and coerced. It is not fear that drives anyone into church these days, but rather its opposite that attracts them: love.