

Think about it! (13)

"Good people go to heaven; and bad people go to hell." Well, that was what a lot of people used to believe in the past, even if it wasn't precisely in those terms. Nowadays, though, fewer and fewer people would agree to that kind of notion. There are a number of reasons for this change: (1) people no longer believe in hell; (2) a lot of people no longer believe in heaven, either – not, at least, in what we might call the traditional concept of heaven; (3) in today's relativistic world it's not as easy as it used to be to identify "good people" and "bad people", in order to be able to speculate about the post mortem fate of either the former or the latter; and (4) heaven and hell have been moved to this life, to the here and now – this life, we are told, and not some existence beyond the grave, is, for some people, "heaven", and, for others, "hell".

Interestingly, in spite of these fairly radical socio-religious changes that have taken place, there is something that does still seem to enjoy constant popularity: the concept of merit, the idea that we shall all get, sooner or later, what we deserve. Even in Christian circles there is this common notion, even if it's beneath people's level of awareness, that all our deeds will one day be weighed in the infallible universal scales, and, depending on which way the scales tip, so will be the sentence, one way or the other. (And 99% of people are in no doubt that in their particular case the scales will tip in their favour!)

But the good news that sums up the Christian message tells us that the exact opposite is in fact true: that the scales of justice, strictly speaking, would condemn all of us, even if some more than others; that nobody is saved by their merits, but that all those who are saved are saved in spite of their complete lack of merit; that the determining factor in salvation is not human merit, but divine grace; and that what saves us is nothing of our own at all, but rather something totally outside ourselves: the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Just by way of example, here are some unanswerable words of the Apostle Paul: "To the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Letter to the Romans 4:5). These words collide head on with the notion of salvation based on human merit: (1) they tell us that the people who are saved are those who don't work – in other words, those who don't have any good works to present in their favour; (2) they tell us that the one who is "justified" – in other words, acquitted, forgiven and accepted – by God, is not the "good" person, but "the wicked"; (3) and they tell us that the only necessary qualification for being saved and getting into heaven, far from being a person's own so-called merits, is a sincere faith in the merits of Christ and in God's mercy. According to God's accounts, there is no such set of scales in which anyone's pros and cons are weighed; there are just two sorts of people: unbelieving sinners and believing sinners; and it's the faith of those in the latter group that is "credited as righteousness" – they are "justified" without any good works of their own, only by trusting in the good work of the Saviour.

Read again the Apostle Paul's words, and ask yourself where they leave you with respect to God: "To the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness."