

Let's get real

Do you remember my friend Martha (not her real name)? I introduced her to you in my very first article, way back in August. She had been told by her church leaders that she had to 'share the gospel' with various people. Martha has three grown-up children, Agatha, Bertie and Cedric. Agatha is still following the faith but Bertie and Cedric – despite what they were always taught – are not. But they are all really lovely people.

I'd also like to introduce you to sixteen lovely ladies I know, who all love the Lord, but their spouses don't. (Of those, 13 go to St Ed's, which only has a congregation of 100–150!). Their spouses are, I believe, all lovely people – some I know well, some I've not yet met.

And if I add two (relatively) young men who are very dear to me, that makes a total of 20 lovely men who don't follow the faith. So, from my 70,000+ words of theological spouting are there any crumbs of comfort for those of us who love these 20 men? Absolutely! Massively! Wonderfully! Gloriously! But let me start from *what I've always been taught*, and then tell you what I now believe to be the more glorious truth.

I've always been taught that unless and until these men acknowledge that they are sinners (despite most of them being really, **really** lovely people), when they die, they are going to hell – eternal separation from God. So how does that make you feel? Fearful? OK, so what are we going to do about it?!

I've always been taught that I have to tell them that they are sinners: 'All your righteous acts are like filthy rags' (Is 64:6), and 'The wages of sin is death' (Rom 6:26) – that sort of thing. If I **don't** tell them, then I will have failed in my responsibility, and their eternal blood will be on my hands.

OK, I'm hamming it up a bit, but isn't that in essence what we've all been taught?

So let's try again, using this new, more glorious gospel that I've (re)discovered – the gospel of restoration.

Imagine Jesus standing in front of your Cedric, or whoever. No, go on, imagine it. Do it now! But imagine Jesus wearing ordinary everyday clothes, so that Cedric isn't distracted by memories of pictures in dusty Bibles.

OK, what did you see in your mind's eye? You saw Jesus looking into Cedric's eyes, and smiling, perhaps? And how did the conversation go? And what did Cedric see in this stranger? How did he react to this man?

I think Cedric would have quickly spotted that this man was interested in him as a person; I think he'd soon have seen what a gracious, loving, open person he was, and I think he'd have related well to him. They'd have chatted about all sorts of things – initially the weather of course (casting Jesus as an Englishman!), but moving on to other things. Jesus would probably have asked about Cedric's family, his friends, his interests. He'd have gradually built up a relationship with him.

If you're into this sort of imagination thing, dwell on this, sit with it, pray into it, be part of it and see what God has to say to you about your relationship with Cedric (or whoever).

But if, like me, you don't really 'do imagination', simply skip to the next page...

*In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have **confidence** on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is **no fear in love**. But **perfect love drives out fear**, because **fear has to do with punishment**. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. (1 Jn 4:17-19)*

For years, I've 'known' that there was no way that my own 'Cedric' would ever come (back) to faith. He and his wife are adamant that any faith that says, 'We're right and everyone else is wrong' is a non-starter – and who can blame them, frankly! (I'll give you my understanding of the verse they quoted, 'No-one comes to the Father except through me,' on another occasion. I don't think it is quite so totally misquoted as 'the wages of sin', but misquoted it is, in my view.)

That fear has now gone; I no longer fear for Cedric's immortal soul. God's perfect love has cast out that fear, because fear has to do with punishment, and God has nothing to do with punishment – never has had and never will have. God **IS LOVE**, and therefore he is only interested in restoration, not punishment. But he won't (can't) force us to accept his love, so hell is the result of our rejecting God's love; in my view, hell is not and never was a form of punishment.

If you disagree and think I'm going 'soft on hell', and that I've quoted my two verses above out of context, please check out the whole chapter and you'll see that they are but the pinnacle of a mountain of love.

So, please have confidence (faith) in our miracle-working God; look into your Cedric's eyes and tell him how much you love him and appreciate him. There's absolutely no need to fear. Here are some scriptures to reassure you:

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God **did not send his Son into the world to condemn** the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe **stands condemned** already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. (Jn 3:16-18) (The one who stands condemned hasn't **been** condemned by God; he is **self**-condemned.)*

*The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting **anyone** to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. (2 Pet 3:9)*

*This is good, and pleases God our Saviour, who wants **all men** to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. (1 Tim 2:3,4)*

So we know from this what God wants, what God's will is: he wants my Cedric and all 19 others to be saved. We can therefore – with confidence (faith) – love, work and pray to see 'thy will be done'. You could say: relax, chill and do God's will. (Or, to quote Julian of Norwich, 'All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.)

They kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Lord, let it be!