

If I were God... I'd let everyone into heaven
Christ Church Liverpool
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The story is told of a man who dies and goes to heaven. As he comes through the pearly gates he discovers the most massive party you could ever imagine. Literally billions of Jews, Hindus, Muslims, Catholics are having a fine old time.

He spends the first few thousand years walking around, meeting great people and enjoying himself immensely. And then, eventually, he reaches the edge of the party. And there is a huge empty space and, beyond it, a massive wall hung all over with signs saying "Silence" and "Quiet". From the other side of the wall he can hear the sound of singing.

The man is greatly puzzled by this and asks a nearby angel what's going on. "Ah", the angel replies, "we keep quiet to keep the people in there happy. You see they are the evangelical Christians and they think they're the only ones here."

It's a story that appeals to the spirit of our age isn't it? A story that says "hey guys we're all the same really." That asks us to celebrate our common humanity and not try and suggest that God finds differences between us on the basis of our religion.

And that's what our topic for this evening is really about – it's a title about tolerance. "If I were God... I'd let everyone into heaven."

We live in a society which sees tolerance as a great, maybe even as the greatest virtue. So we find anything that suggests that **God** might be intolerant very difficult to live with. And a suggestion that God might exclude some people from heaven reeks of precisely the intolerance that most of us have been taught to hate from an early age.

It was exactly a decade ago that we had the *International Year of Tolerance*. Mind you 2005 is the international year of Physics, the international year of microcredit (NOT very small credit cards) and, my personal favourite, the international year of PE! So maybe international years don't mean very much after all.

But anyway there is no doubt that tolerance is generally considered to be a great virtue in our culture. And there's no doubt that if God does refuse to let some people into heaven,

for whatever reason, that is pretty definitely intolerant.

Which leaves us, I think, with two questions to think about for the next 15 minutes or so. Firstly is tolerance really such a virtue after all? And what level of tolerance or intolerance ought we to expect from God?

1 Is tolerance really such a virtue after all?

The following is an extract from an article by a journalist called Kingsbury Smith:

Fritz Sauckel was brought face to face with his doom, Wearing a sweater with no coat and looking wild eyed Sauckel proved to me the most defiant of any of them... Gazing around the room from the gallows platform he suddenly screamed out "I am dying innocent the sentence is wrong. God protect Germany and make Germany great again." The trap door was sprung at 2.26am. He hung there and was pronounced dead at 2.40am.

As Australian writer and speaker Philip Jensen puts it "There can be no more intolerant statement on a man's life than to kill him." How could it be morally right that a man can hang for those minutes having the breath squeezed out of him?

The following is an extract from a witness statement given to the trial of Fritz Sauckel:

"I was sent as prisoner to the Dachau concentration camp in 1941. In June 1942 I was taken into the hospital as a surgeon. Shortly afterwards I was directed to conduct stomach operations on twenty healthy patients. Because I would not do this I was put to work in the autopsy room where I stayed until April 1945. While there I performed I performed approximately 7,000 autopsies. During my time at Dachau I was familiar with many kinds of medical experiments carried on there with human victims. These people were never volunteers.

"In 1942/43 experiments on human beings were carried out by Dr Rashia to determine the effects of changing air pressure. As many as 25 persons were put at one time into a specially constructed van in which pressure could be increased or decreased as required. The purpose was to find out the effect of high altitude and a rapid parachute descent on human beings.

"Through a window in the van I have seen the people lying on the floor. Most of the prisoners who were made use of in these

experiments died through internal haemorrhaging of the lungs and of brain. The rest coughed up blood when taken out. Those not dead were sent to invalid blocks and liquidated shortly after.

"Rashia also conducted experiments on the effect of cold water on human beings. The subjects were placed in ice cold water and kept there until unconscious.

"Liver puncture experiments were performed by Dr Bracht on healthy people.

"Phlegm experiments were conducted... 40 healthy men were used at a time of whom 20 were given intramuscular and 20 intravenous injections of puss from diseased persons. All treatments were forbidden for 3 days by which time serious inflammation and in many cases general blood poisoning had occurred. For these experiments Polish, Czech and Dutch priests were ordinarily used. Pain was intense in such experiments. Most of the 600-800 persons who were used finally died.

"It was common practice to remove the skin from the dead prisoners... It was chemically treated and placed in the sun to dry. After that it was cut into various sizes and used for saddles, riding breeches, gloves, house slippers and ladies handbags. Tattooed skin was particularly valued by SS men.

"This skin had to be from healthy prisoners. Sometimes we didn't have enough bodies with good skin.... The next day we would receive 20 or 30 bodies of young people. They would have been shot in the neck... so that the skin would not be injured. It was dangerous in those days to have good skin."

Fritz Sauckel was the Nazi director of slave labour who put millions into the infamous concentration camps of Auschwitz, Dachau and Buchwald. As one commentator put it he introduced slavery on a scale unknown since before the Christian era 200 years ago.

Whatever your views here on the appropriateness of the death penalty there can be no doubt, I think, that Sauckel, and the other Nazis executed at Nuremberg after World War II, those men who had brought misery and death to untold millions, deserved exactly what they got. In fact I think most of us would agree that death was too good for them.

But where does that leave tolerance? You see the trouble with tolerance is that it is only valuable as a relative virtue.

Clearly in a world full of irritations caused by other – both intentional and unintentional, both major and minor – we need to learn to be tolerant of the faults of others.

Anyone who shares a house – whether with your parents, your spouse or your friends – knows that without a little tolerance on all sides of the things that upset and annoy us every single human being would have to have their own home, shielded entirely from the rest of the world. We need tolerance – it's a good thing.

But to make tolerance an absolute virtue is very dangerous. And to elevate tolerance as a goal to which we should all strive leads in the end either to the worst sort of intolerance or to an astonishingly immoral apathy.

Let me explain that to you. We have made tolerance such a virtue that the only thing most of our society really hates is intolerance. We are tolerant of everything except intolerance. And in the end of course that is simply illogical.

In one university recently a group of people campaigning against the Christian Union's mission event put up posters that said: "Ban religious intolerance on campus"

You don't have to think about that for more than about ten seconds before the total nonsense of it becomes clear!

In fact the only person who can be consistently tolerant is the person who is tolerant to the point of total apathy. As Christian thinker and writer G K Chesterton put it: "*Tolerance is the virtue of the man without convictions.*"

If we make tolerance a supreme virtue we are left with a choice between being massively illogical and supremely indifferent. And who wants to be either of those things?

Is tolerance really such a virtue after all? Well it all depends on what we mean by tolerance.

There are some things – genocide, murder, rape to name but three – that every decent human being ought to be massively intolerant of. Tolerance of these things is no virtue – it is an evil.

There are other things that may irritate us greatly but that, for the pleasure of others, we need to learn to tolerate – our neighbour's child learning the violin or playing Westlife CDs for example.

And, of course, there are many things between.

So what level of tolerance or intolerance ought we to expect from God?

God's word to humankind, the Bible, portrays God as both tolerant and intolerant. One passage in the Bible perhaps illustrates that supremely well. These are the words of God to Moses, leader of Israel, on Mount Sinai some 3,500 years ago, describing himself:

"The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished."

God is tolerant. He forgives wickedness, rebellion and sin. In other words it is in God's nature to forgive people like me and like you – wicked, rebellious and sinful people. He abounds in love and faithfulness.

Despite the fact that humanity in general has rebelled against the God who made us and destroyed the perfect world that he created he has not given up on us. We are still here. God tolerates us, even in our sin.

God is not quick to bring human beings to book. In fact the Bible tells us elsewhere that God hates to see people, even the most wicked people, come before his throne of judgment and be excluded from his kingdom – he does desire that people would enter heaven rather than being cast into hell.

The Lord God, the God of the Bible, the God who is really there is a compassionate and gracious God. He abounds in love and faithfulness. He forgives wickedness, rebellion and sin. God is tolerant. But he has not made tolerance into his supreme virtue.

Hell will not be an empty place in eternity. Not everybody will be in heaven.

And when you hear of the atrocity of the Nazis that we, rightly, would not and could not tolerate why should we expect God to tolerate them either and leave the guilty unpunished?

It is in God's character not to leave the guilty unpunished. Of course anyone who is at all perceptive will have noticed that there is an apparent contradiction in these verses.

How can God forgive wickedness, rebellion and sin AND YET not leave the guilty unpunished? Or, to put the question another

way, how can God be both tolerant AND intolerant at the same time?

You see if we have rebelled against God, and we have, the problem is not so much whether everyone will be in heaven as whether anyone will be in heaven!

This tension, between God's love and compassion and his holy justice is set up for us right back near the beginning of the Bible in the verses we've just read and in countless other places in the Old Testament.

How can God maintain a perfect standard of justice – and who would want to believe in a God with anything other than a perfect standard of justice – and forgive sin?

We might think that if we were God we'd let everyone into heaven. But when push came to shove I'm sure that Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot wouldn't be on our guest list. But would they really be the only three? What about the countless other warlords and tyrants of history? And their henchmen? And their foot soldiers? And what about the murderers and the child abusers and the rapists and the terrorists?

And what about the people whose selfishness has destroyed families and spoiled friendships and what about me and what about you? Would we really completely sacrifice justice to bring everyone into heaven? And if we did would it really be heaven?

If justice is done then heaven will be empty. But God will not sacrifice justice to make heaven full.

Instead he sacrificed himself in the person of his Son the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Christians in Rome explains why it is that God sent his Son to die on a Roman cross:

"He did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus."

God has not sacrificed justice to bring people into heaven. He has sent his Son. Justice has been done. When Jesus died on a Roman cross he bore the full judgment, the awesome wrath of God upon himself.

That is why Christians say that trusting and believing in Jesus Christ the Son of God is the only way to get to heaven. Not because we desire to be narrow and exclusivist. Not at all. But because only Jesus has paid for us.

Only Christians will be heaven. Not because Christians are better than anyone else – by definition Christians are people who recognise that we are not good. That we need God's love and forgiveness and grace. But because God will not sacrifice his justice.

Instead he came himself, in the person of his son, to open the way to heaven for all, for anyone, who puts their trust in Jesus.

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