

The French existentialist philosopher and playwright Jean Paul Sartre famously wrote: “*Hell is other people*”, and if you have ever been at the DMV or on the New York City subway during rush hour, you most likely would agree with him.

The line itself comes from his 1944 play *No Exit*, which is about three very different people whose fate in hell is to be with one another in a very small room for all eternity, confessing their sins to one another- as if that would do anything at this point, and thereby that leads to the tragedy, and at the same time the ridiculousness, of the situation. And because of that context, what Sartre meant by that line “*Hell is other people*” is not what it appears to mean.

Sartre himself explains it in his book *Being and Nothingness*, in which he writes: “*By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other.*” Which just means that we are in a real sense confined and limited by what other persons perceive us to be and who they judge us to be, and that is our hell- to not experience ourselves as we truly are, but to see ourselves only as an object, as what someone else thinks of me.

When the truth is that I am- and you are- an infinitely valuable human person whose value is intrinsic to ourselves and not to what someone says about me or about you. In the Judeo-Christian understanding, each of us is made in the image and likeness of God and therefore good and holy by nature. And we live in community with other good and holy persons and- ideally at least- opening up to one another in love and in respect and in a desire to lift each other up. An equality of persons, each different and yet each equally valuable and important, and each with something to offer- and in the Christian understanding, a mirror of the Trinity.

Countless words have been written trying to explain the Trinity, and the subtext of all those words is that you really can't explain it- that it is essentially a mystery. But we have to say something about it- simply put, God is Trinity, a union of three persons- three and yet one- and the only reason that we even have such an outlandish theory is because of Jesus Christ himself.

Very soon after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the people who encountered him began to think that there was something to this Jesus that made him much more than just a prophet, much more than just a holy teacher. There was something about Jesus and his way of being in the world that made people think that in the person of Jesus, we see God himself at work in the world- that if God had a human face, this is what He would look like. And these followers of Jesus, and the communities of faith that started to form around them, began to reflect on what all this meant.

Basically, these early followers began to see that God was present in the world, that God was revealing Himself to the world, and that God was bringing salvation to the world, in a special and unique way in Jesus, the Son of God made flesh. Through Jesus' way of being in the world and His way of relating to people, the compassion and love of God was being made clearly present in the world. And even more importantly, people were learning how to live in the world as Jesus was showing us how to, and even more importantly than that, they were being empowered to live in that way.

And these early followers remembered the words of Jesus that He and his Father were one, and that He would send his Spirit to them once He had returned to his Father, to be His presence among them in all places and at all times. To boil it all down then, the three ways that God was saving the world- through the Father, through the Son, and through the Spirit, suggested that these three persons were actually one- one in being, but also one in the mission of the

redemption of the world and every person in it- a mission that was about freeing every person from what prevents them from living as they should. Not limiting them but instead allowing them to continue to become the persons God had created them to be.

And in every relationship- every healthy relationship- that we are part of, we are mirroring the life of the Trinity. In each relationship we have the choice of whether we will dominate the other person in that relationship, or if we will treat the other person as an equal and as a fellow child of God who was put into our lives for a reason, whether we can name that reason right now or not. Empowering them simply by loving them.

Living and relating as Jesus did, and you are already doing that every day of your lives. You are doing the best that you can to show the world what the face of God looks like, just like Jesus did and just as we are all able to do. And that is how heaven is beginning to be made present here on earth.

The only other option is hell, and hell is essentially refusing to see the truth of the love that pervades the universe, and which just wants us to be filled with that love and share it in the worlds we are part of. A love that doesn't ask that much from us really, but which gives us so much in return.

It seems like the easiest choice in the world to me, but what do I know?