
FROM THE DARK WOOD TO THE BEATIFIC VISION: JOURNEYING THROUGH LENT WITH DANTE

Part 1: “Abandon all hope, you who enter”



St Columba's, Culloden
Wednesday 21 February 2018

Brief Biography

1265: Dante Alighieri is born in Florence
1274: First meeting with Beatrice Portinari
1283: Second meeting with Beatrice
1285: Dante marries Gemma Donati (betrothed 1277)
1289: Fights at the battle of Campaldino
1290: Death of Beatrice (married to Simone de' Bardi)
1293-1294: Writes the *Vita Nuova*
1295 ff.: Dante in public office;
1300: One of the six Priors
1301: Ambassador to the Pope
1302: Exile and fine of 5,000 florins; death sentence
1304-1306: Verona, Treviso, Padua (Giotto?)
1304-1307: Writes the *Convivio* and the *De Vulgari Eloquentia*
1309: In Paris and Oxford (?)
1310: Writes the *De Monarchia*
1307-1312: Writes the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*
1312-1318: In Verona; writing the *Paradiso*; rejects Florentine amnesty.
1318-1321: In Ravenna; dies on 13 September 1321

The *Commedia* as a 'Classic Text'

Structure of the *Commedia*

- Composed of three distinct parts, or books – known as *cantiche*: =
 - *Inferno* (Hell)
 - *Purgatorio* (Purgatory)
 - *Paradiso* (Paradise)
- It is composed of 100 chapters, or *canti*: 3 x 33 *canti*, plus one extra (introduction) = 100 in total.

What is the *Commedia* actually about?

- At its simplest level, it is about the journey of Dante the pilgrim through the depths of Hell, and up the Mountain of Purgatory to the celestial delights of Paradise.
- It presents us with a view of life in the late medieval period: politics, society, the church..
- Universal appeal: it is the journey of Everyman – an allegorical search for God.
- It is a practical guide to living a good, moral life.
- It is a deeply spiritual work, informed by Catholic theology.

Why is it suitable for Lent?

- The poem is a profound reflection on the human condition:
 - on our desire for God: the journey through life.
 - on our brokenness: the nature of sin = Hell.
 - on our need for healing = Purgatory.
 - on our quest for salvation = Paradise.

Opening Lines of the *Inferno*: The Dark Wood

Virgil as Guide

- Virgil represents the voice of Reason; later we will meet the soul of Beatrice (= Faith). Dante will require both Reason AND Faith in order to carry out his journey.

“Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth” (Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 1998).

- He was the greatest poet of all time, in Dante’s eyes, and a great influence on him.
- Virgil was seen as a prophetic figure: he is thought to have predicted the coming of Christianity in Book IV of his *Eclogues*.
- Virgil was also an expert in the Underworld, because his hero Aeneas had journeyed there in Book VI of the *Aeneid*.

The Structure of Hell

- Hell comprises a series of ever-narrowing concentric circles, each one reserved for a particular kind of sin.
- There are three major subdivisions:
 - sins of incontinence (excessive love)
 - sins of violence (deficiency of love)
 - sins of fraud (defect of love)
- Hell is a dark and loveless place of absolute egotism and stubborn, unbending will. “Abandon every hope, all you who enter” (*Inferno* 3: 9).

Our Broken Humanity: The Concept of Sin

- Sin is not so much the transgression of moral laws, as a failure of love.
- We love the wrong things (defective love)... or we love the right things but in the wrong way (excessive love or deficient love).
- The souls in Hell are not willing to change.
- As a result of their own conscious choice, they have deliberately chosen to cut themselves off from God.

The Doctrine of the ‘Contrapasso’ (‘Counter-Penalty’)

- A form of divine retribution – the punishment fits the crime.
- Dante’s purpose is to demonstrate the disfiguring nature of sin.

NEXT WEEK: we’ll look at the particular forms of evil, and the specific characters who populate Hell ..

- Paolo and Francesca (Canto V)
- Farinata (Canto X)
- Pier delle Vigne (Canto XIII)
- Pope Nicholas III (Canto XIX)
- Ulysses / Guido da Montefeltro (XXVII)
- Count Ugolino (XXXIII)
- Lucifer (XXXIV)

Questions for Discussion

1. Following the model of St Thomas Aquinas, Dante sees sin as ‘love gone wrong’. How would *you* define ‘sin’? (cf. *Catechism*, § 1849-51)
2. What makes sin ‘deadly’?
3. To what extent is Dante ideally placed to talk about Hell?

For Private Reflection

1. Have you ever found yourself in a ‘dark wood’? How did you manage to find the right path?
2. In the Sacrament of Confession, we are cleansed of our sins, and reconciled to the Lord and to one another. Think about the last time you made your Confession. How did you feel afterwards?

Closing Prayer