



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Hell is other people

16 June 2024. © Rachel Mackintosh

It's 1944.
It's Hell.

A boy shows our first character Garcin into a room that is furnished with three old-fashioned couches of different colours, no windows, no mirrors — nothing breakable — and a doorbell.

Garcin wants to know where are the stakes, the grilling irons, the water torture ...

Seeing there are none, he then complains that “they” have taken his toothbrush.

The boy laughs, and explains that everyone asks the same questions. First they look for instruments of torture. At that moment they are not thinking of their personal grooming. And as soon as they are reassured about the torture, they all ask about their toothbrush.

“Why would you brush your teeth?” the boy asks.

In the silence we begin to sense the nature of Garcin's situation.

He is in a room where the lights are always lit, where there is no sleep. No need to brush your teeth.

Presently, one by one, the boy ushers in two more characters.

First Inès. Inès wants to know where her lover, Florence, is. The boy doesn't know. And then Inès mistakes Garcin for her executioner.

Her executioner. Except he isn't.

Our sense of the situation increases, and perhaps our confusion.

Garcin puts his head in his hands.

Next, the boy brings in Estelle. The first words from her mouth are an entreaty to Garcin not to lift his head: "I know that your face is missing."

When she sees that Garcin is not who she thought he was, she reacts as if she is being shown to a hotel salon: remarking on the décor and asking for flowers.

The tension in the room grows.
And perhaps our confusion.

The boy leaves them alone together.

They discuss why they are there, together, in this room. Is it chance?

Ines: "Chance? Try moving the furniture and tell me if it's chance. And the heat? This terrible heat? I tell you that they arranged everything. Right down to the last detail. With love. This room was waiting for us."

Our sense of the situation develops.

They know they are dead. They know this is the waiting room for Hell.

They begin to lie to each other about why they are there.

Estelle doesn't know. She just had pneumonia, she married a man for his money ... is that so bad? Think about how many people die each day. Surely you would expect some clerical errors in where people are sent.

Garcin was a hero, a pacifist who resisted the war.

Inès challenges them: "We had our moments of pleasure, people died for us. Now we have to pay.

"The only person missing is the executioner. It's cost-cutting. They are leaving us to it. We are each each other's executioner."

Garcin doesn't want to be an executioner. He has a solution.

"Let's withdraw from each other so we can't hurt each other."

Garcin goes silent.

This doesn't bring any peace as the unease in the room always finds purchase.

Now Estelle frets that there are no mirrors. She needs a mirror. She says: "I feel funny ... when I can't see myself, I have to pinch myself, I wonder if I really exist."

Does she really exist?

Inès offers to be her mirror, guides her to fix her lipstick and then says, “Yes, that’s better now: heavier, more cruel. Your lips of hell.”

Hell deepens, gets hotter. Is it hot in here?

Garcin breaks his silence and asks them to try and forget each other’s presence.

Doesn’t work. Inès tells him that his silence screams in her ears.

Now, finally, they begin to tell the truth.

Garcin slept with his lover in his own house with his wife in the next room. He was a deserter and a coward, not a hero. Inès was cruel to her lover Florence and to Florence’s husband and her lover gassed them both in a murder-suicide. Estelle drowned her illegitimate baby. The baby’s father shot himself in the face.

This is what their lies and shame were hiding. Now we know the naked truth.

Garcin hopes that now that they are naked down to their skeletons, perhaps they can help each other. Find a way out. An exit.

There are unbreakable threads connecting them all.

He says, “Either we all go down together, or we all get out together.”

Instead they start insulting each other, being as cruel as they possibly can:

“We will now continuously chase each other and never catch up, like horses on a merry-go-round.”

Inès pursues Estelle, Estelle pursues Garcin.

In complete contradiction of what he has just said, Garcin falls into an awkward seduction game with Estelle. While Inès watches.

But they draw back at the last minute ...
It is not each other's bodies they need. It is each other's trust.

No one in the room has any trust to give, and nor can they receive it.

Garcin, desperate, decides to make a break for it alone.

The doorbell doesn't work.

His fists rain on the door in a frantic drumming. He begs for physical torture as an escape from the mental anguish of being trapped in this room with Estelle and Inès.

The door opens suddenly and he nearly falls through it.

He hesitates. He is a coward.

As Inès says, “You are nothing more than your life.”

They close the door.

It was ten times hotter in the room with the door open.

And then it becomes clear.

This is not the ante-room of Hell.

This is Hell.

Garcin says: “L’enfer; c’est les autres.” “Hell is other people.”

This story is the telling of Jean-Paul Sartre’s play, *Huis Clos* — *No exit*.

You are nothing more than your life.

Sartre talked a lot about the problem of other people. In his major philosophical work, *Being and nothingness* —, *L’être et le néant*, he made a similar point to the central thesis in *Huis Clos*: “...ma chute originelle, c’est l’existence de l’autre. — my original downfall is the existence of the other.”

This thesis is illustrated in Sartre’s life in the following way.

A young writer, Jean Genet, who grew up in bourgeois comfort in foster care and did well at school, subsequently ran away, and spent time as a vagabond, thief and sex worker. He spent time in the French Foreign Legion and was dishonourably discharged for indecency. He went to prison, where he began his writing career.

In the late 1940s, after 10 convictions, he was under threat of a life sentence. Sartre and other artistic luminaries of the time, including Jean Cocteau and Pablo Picasso, successfully petitioned the president to have the sentence set aside.

Sartre then wrote an analysis of Genet's life, called *Saint Genet*, chronicling his journey from vagabond to celebrated author.

Genet was so fixed by Sartre's view of him that he became artistically paralysed and didn't write anything for at least five years. Genet was a living example of hell being other people. He was fixed in the hell of Sartre's portrait of him. He was unable to act.

In *No exit* the characters are dead. They can't act.

We are still in our lives. We are able to act.

And for Genet, after five years he started to write again, and produced brilliant plays that showed how people can be fixed by the views of others, how they can suffer by becoming what they mean to others, and also how they can subvert that burden and create new truths and new pathways.

We always have that choice when we are in our lives.

Garcin begins to suggest choices and possibilities when he proposes that we can avoid being each other's executioners by giving each other space.

He begins to suggest choices and possibilities when he notes that we are all connected to each other and that we can deal with this either by all going down together, or by all helping each other.

Although Garcin, Inès and Estelle's hell is to be like horses on a merry-go-round, forever pursuing each other and for ever not reaching each other, we have other options.

Even Sartre thought so. The “nothingness” in his great work, *Being and nothingness* is the realm of possibility. Nothingness is the gap, the moment of choice that follows every action of our lives. Nothingness is where we have options. This is either terrifying or liberating. And, not to be binary, it may be a combination of the two.

In the words of Joan Baez: “Every day on earth is another chance to get it right.”

And we, as members of this community — whether we are guests, here for a while, passing through, or have made the choice to continue to journey together — we have choices too.

We can consider how each of us might have allowed ourselves to be fixed by other people’s views of us.

We can consider what other options we have. We can work to develop our relationships in and outside this community, so that we make the world a better place.

As John DiLeo said a couple of weeks ago, we can consider how, in this community we can do good.

Together.

We are all connected, and we can make that connection rich by participating. With your food basket and my food basket, the people with thrive.

We are in the midst of our canvass. Each year, at canvass time, we have the opportunity to renew our commitment to this community, to each other, and to the possibilities for doing good.

I finish with the words of another French writer of the 20th century: Anaïs Nin:

“And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.”

Amen.

Meditation / Discussion question:

When have you found the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom?