Jesus Christ is God. And God is a God who loves and is love itself in its infinite stretching out, generously and sacrificially, to embrace. “Come to me,” He calls, “and I will give you rest.” Here is an exercise of His love that opens arms to receive us, however wretched our condition. In fact, it is specifically to the wretched of the earth that He calls, because those who are convinced or able to convince themselves they’re alright see no need, have no need, of what Jesus Christ offers. Life is not a ride on one of those old-fashioned carousels where you move gently around on a wooden horse that goes up and down in a soothing rhythm while a panorama of the world opens below and around us. Even the most comfortable today are boxing, coxing and coping. We learn strategies for coping. And sometimes it’s those very strategies for coping that enable us not to require an endless appeal to the grace of God. We know restlessness, we long for rest, but we get through sufficiently to avoid being wretched – though we see the wretchedness of others on every side. But it is the wretched, the ones who are sick of themselves, the ones who are exhausted by their own condition, the ones who can’t cope that He calls. And He loves them into a right and just self-dignity; and He loves them into a right and just self-acceptance. His enriching love makes them worthy. They were always worthy in His eyes. But as He loves them into salvation they become rightly and justly worthy in their own.

Why am I saying all this? Because we have been handed this morning in the lectionary reading from Luke’s Gospel a scandalous text; a stumbling-block of a text that has caused and no doubt will always cause great offence among all those who are liberally minded and humanist. And there is much that is cultivated within us as Christians that fosters and develops liberal mindedness and humanism. So we too will be, and should be, scandalized. This is not the Jesus Christ we like very much. None of us can be sure where we stand with this Jesus. “I will warn you who to fear: fear him who, after he has killed,
has the authority to cast into hell. Believe me, he is the one to fear.” The passage begins with a warning against the “leaven of the Pharisees” and, of course, what we do not do, as Christian readers, is list ourselves among the Pharisees. Oh no, no! There is no hypocrisy among Christians! We align ourselves with the disciples. But, let’s be clear, it’s the disciples who are being warned “who to fear.” With some adroit, interpretative footwork we can go away believing this doesn’t really apply to us. We can go away with a modicum of comfort and pass on to the what the Holy Spirit will empower us to do in difficult circumstances. But the sticking point remains a whacking big thorn in very vulnerable human flesh: “fear him who… has the authority to cast into hell.”

Let me just sharpen the pointedness of that thorn: how can a God of love, a God who is love, also exercise the authority to cast into hell? In other passages in the Gospels, passages in which Jesus Christ, who is God (let me emphasize), speaks - we have some pretty awful depictions of this hell. Fire, wailing, teeth being gnashed etc. Not the kind of afterlife anyone would wish for. As I said, life as we know it now is no trip on a merry-go-round. If eternal life is to get a great deal worse for some (though, of course, we don’t account ourselves among them), then I’m lost to understand what love is. I grant that this love, as worked out in the self-sacrificial life (and death) of Jesus himself, is not the sentimental confectionary cooked up by the manufacturers of cards for St. Valentine’s Day. But I’m still left grappling to understand what kind of love this is. Of course, we could consign all this talk of hell to the dustbin of antiquated mythologies – worldviews of the past inhabited and believed in by people less sophisticated and enlightened than ourselves, two millennia later. But it’s still there – in a sacred text and spoken by God Himself in Christ.

One thing I do know. In all the accounts of creation in the Hebrew Bible nowhere is there an indication that God created hell. Hell is not of God. He didn’t make it. And since He alone is the creator then it makes no sense to ask who did create it. Hell has no existence in God and as St. Paul reminds us, God is in all things, through all things and above all things. Hell cannot be a place, because there is no place outside of God, in and through which God as creator is present. And there is nothing in these depictions of Hell other than people. It isn’t populated with any other species than our own. So hell, then can only be a condition that we as human beings create outside of God, in rebellion and resistance to God and His creation; a condition that is judged by God, in God and through God as godless. It is judged with infinite pity because, in its darkness, it cannot behold the rich and generous liberality in Christ. Not because those there have been
made unable to see, but because they have, in ways that are beyond our human excavation, refused to hear the call of Christ to come – to come however exhausted with labours and burdens to the one who can give them infinite and eternal rest. Maybe they just don’t see and refuse to see how belaboured and burdened they are. Who can say?

All I can say - and this doesn’t answer half the questions this passage in Luke raises – but, all I can say is: on clear, bright mornings in summer the sun rises through our stained glass window at the east end of the Cathedral, illuminating Christ at the heart of creation, as the Pancreator: the God of love in and through whom all things were created. It illuminates Christ as judge of all things; and His eyes are doleful. Doleful because Christ understands that the wretched of the earth (and we among them) are far, far more wretched than they realize. Hell is everything His love refuses. And the salvation He brings is deliverance from the loveless, bitter condition that some human beings have consigned themselves to. It is only in this way that I can understand the words of Jesus Christ in our lectionary reading this morning: “he who disowns me before men will be disowned before the angels of God.” These are the ones who refuse to allow the eyes of their hearts to be opened and the illumination of the beauty of Christ to scatter the darkness imprisoning them. Let us keep our eyes of faith open – for there are depths of illumination in Christ that we have yet to receive; that we might love better.