

St Mary's Church, Dorchester, Sunday 21st June 2026, i.e. 3rd Sunday after Trinity

Jeremiah 20:7-13

Romans 6:1b-11

Matthew 10:24-39

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I recently re-watched a favourite TV series of mine on Netflix. It's called *The Good Place*. The premise of the show is that the main character, Eleanor, is dead. When she opens her eyes, she sees the words: "Welcome! Everything is great!" She meets a being who looks like a kindly older gentleman, who introduces himself as Michael. Michael is a sort of angelic figure who is the architect of a neighbourhood in the afterlife; and it's a good neighbourhood. Michael informs Eleanor that she doesn't need to worry about anything now: having lived an exemplary life, she has been rewarded with an eternal home in Michael's heavenly neighbourhood, the Good Place.

Except that everything is not great, because Eleanor doesn't belong in the Good Place. As Michael lists all of the virtuous things that Eleanor did in her life, and tells her that each of these actions won her lots of points in a kind of cosmic league-table, Eleanor realises that he is confusing her with someone else; she has got in by mistake. What she knows – what no-one else seems to know – is that she was an awful person in life; she should have been sent to "the Bad Place". The series follows the chaotic consequences of her attempts to avoid being discovered.

I say that Eleanor was an awful person in life. To emphasise the point, the viewer is treated to occasional flashbacks from her past. We learn, for example, that far from being a humanitarian lawyer, as Michael thinks, Eleanor actually worked in a call centre selling fake medication to vulnerable people: a job that she enjoyed, and that she was very good at. In her work and in her private life Eleanor shunned relationships, preferring a life of independence and self-gratification, often at the expense of people who were unfortunate enough to cross her path.

You may not have guessed it from what I've said so far, but *The Good Place* is a *comedy*. At first a large part of the comedy is watching Eleanor's disgust at the saccharine wholesomeness of the place she finds herself in. There's a delicious moment in the first episode where Eleanor realises that the Good Place doesn't even allow her to swear – she doesn't even have the consolation of cursing in the afterlife.

It's funny for us to watch her floundering, but real reason the show works as a comedy is because it is deeply hopeful. At first literally the only thing Eleanor has going for her is her selfish desire to avoid eternal torment in the Bad Place. But even that selfish desire works to her good, because it forces her to do something in death that she never tried in life: she throws herself on the mercy of another human being, appealing to their good nature, and she means it. She even makes a friend, and through that friendship she slowly learns what's involved in being a good person. There are lots of false starts and dead-ends, but she does change.

So on one level there's a lot of straightforward comedy, and on another level there is real hope in the series. There's also a lot of good thinking in it. One of the main characters is (or was, in life) an academic, a teacher of ethics: and he provides the justification for including a lot of philosophy in the show. But ethics aside, *The Good Place* is a parable for grace at work in human relationships. The really transformative moments in the series are where characters come face to face with the ultimate consequences of their actions, and you see their conscience maturing before your eyes. You watch them reaching rock bottom. They realise that ultimately self-preservation cannot work: the only thing that will save you in the end is love; and it's only love if it costs you something. In fact, it's only really love if it costs you everything.

Every now and again, whether intentionally or not, our popular culture produces something which shows how fundamentally dependent we still are on our Christian traditions, and especially our Bible. I think *The Good Place* is an example of that. Consider these words from the prophet Jeremiah that we heard a few minutes ago:

...whenever I speak, I must cry out,
I must shout, 'Violence and destruction!'
For the word of the Lord has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.
If I say, 'I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name',
then within me there is something like a burning fire
shut up in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in,
and I cannot. [Jeremiah 20:8-9]

What a description of the mature conscience! The word of God cutting like a two-edged sword

through all of our attempts at compromise, all of our attempts to justify a way of life that is anything less than the love that God has created us for, the love that will ultimately claim us one way or another. In *The Good Place* too there comes a moment where even Eleanor just cannot avoid speaking the truth any longer. It's remarkable television: I don't know how the writers got away with broadcasting something so morally serious.

Now, as far as I'm aware, *The Good Place* wasn't written as a preparation for the Gospel. But in this show judgement and justification are experienced as powerful realities in the lives of the characters. All of that, I would argue, comes from a basically Christian outlook on the world. So, for example, the Apostle Paul says,

How can we who died to sin go on living in it? [Romans 6:2]

The question of whether or not to sin defines our choices here and now: are we, here and now, truly living out of the source of our life and hope, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Or are we trying to carry on living in a way that we know has already failed and will always fail? That's where we find ourselves; that's the question that the Holy Spirit puts to us every day, quietly or not so quietly, as Paul says. It's also where Eleanor and the other characters of *The Good Place* find themselves.

All of this takes us to our Gospel reading. There are lots of reasons why *The Good Place* is a particularly appropriate parable to illuminate this Gospel passage – I can't reveal some of those to you without spoiling the series. But let's go with this for now: Jesus says,

Do not fear those who can kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. [Matthew 10:28]

And again Jesus says,

Those who find their life will lose it; and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.
[10:39]

There is ultimately no room for compromise between heaven and hell, between love and not-love. *The Good Place* lives up to its name: you can think of it as a parable for how we are to live on earth; or maybe it's a contemporary illustration of the doctrine of purgatory. Either way, *The Good Place* shares the same character as the good world in which God has placed us. Like the characters in the show, we have a choice. We can choose to live for ourselves, which in the end is the same as choosing our own destruction; or we can choose love, which always gives itself, like a seed placed in the earth in hope.

Let us pray.

Almighty God,
you have broken the tyranny of sin
and have send the Spirit of your Son into our hearts
whereby we call you Father:
give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service,
that we and all creation may be brought
to the glorious liberty of the children of God;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.