

## Getting to know our Faith and our Church

A month or so ago someone asked "What does the Bible mean when it refers to 'the gnashing of teeth'?"

The phrase "(there shall be) **weeping and gnashing of teeth**" (in the original Greek ὁ κλαυθμὸς καὶ ὁ βρυγμὸς τῶν ὀδόντων) appears seven times in the New Testament as a description of the torments of the damned in Hell. It is thought to derive from a phrase attributed to Jesus in the hypothetical Q source, which many scholars believe to have been a primary source for the writing of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (cf Matthew 8:12 and Luke 13:28). The other five occurrences (Matthew 13:42, Matthew 13:50, Matthew 22:13, Matthew 24:51, and Matthew 25:30) are all within the context of parables and are widely held to be phrases woven into the text by Matthew when he was collating the various sources available to him..

Apart from these Gospel references gnashing of teeth only occurs one further time in the New Testament, again in Luke's writing but this time in the Acts of the Apostles in connection with the stoning of Stephen to death: "When they heard these things, they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth" (Acts 7:54).

The most closely related use of the phrase in the Old Testament comes within Psalm 112 at verse 10: *"The wicked will see and be vexed, they will gnash their teeth and waste away; the longings of the wicked will come to nothing."* There is similar usage in Job 16.9, Psalm 35.16, Psalm 37.12 and Lamentations 2.16.

Gnashing is full of anger and rage but lacks bite – this represents the frustration of the wicked and evildoers, their wrath and anger turning in on themselves. Artistically, Hieronymus Bosch is one of the most famous artists to have explored the imagery of 'gnashing of teeth' in his triptychs where one panel captures the medieval vision of hell and its torments. One of the distinctive features of Bosch's works is that he tends to portray Hell not as some other worldly fantastical space but in raw imagery of human life with recognisable people and situations included within his grotesque depictions: To paraphrase the Belinda Carlisle song lyric, Bosch in many ways suggests that 'Hell is a place on earth'.