

## Sermon Preached at John the Baptist Devizes December 4th 2016 –Advent II

In Advent we contemplate the Four Last Things: Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell. So we have a sequence. First death which is certain. We shall all die. Then judgement, when our final destination is decided; heaven or hell. Today is the second Sunday in Advent, so my subject is Judgement, and indeed the Day of Judgement.

In the olden days' fire and brimstone preachers were prone to frighten their listeners about the Day of Judgement. There is a story – apocryphal – about the Reverend Ian Paisley. He has reached the climax of his sermon on judgement. The good have been welcomed into heaven by St Peter. "But those of you who have erred and strayed from the ways of righteousness will be despatched into outer darkness. There shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth". A little old lady in the front pew speaks up. "Reverend Paisley, I have no teeth". "Teeth will be provided".

I suppose belief in a Day of Judgement rests in part on the story of the Great Assize in Matthew Chapter 25, when Christ separates the sheep from the goats. The sheep are those who have helped various categories of needy people. They go to heaven. The goats are those who gave no such help, and are sent to the 'eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'

I don't begin to accept this. First, because I am entirely with those scholars who believe that the story is a concoction of Matthew's: the words are not those of Jesus. Second, because I have an unshakeable belief in the Christ who loves us and gave himself for us. He is not a ruthless, threatening tyrant. The good news really is good news, and has no sting in its tail. I trust St John: "God sent the Son into the world not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through him".

We live in a rule—bound society. We need proper rules and sanctions to protect us from crime, to ensure that we pay our taxes, to prevent mayhem on our roads, and so on and so on. We don't want anarchy: we want justice, and fairness. And surely Almighty God, in his sphere, must insist on justice and fairness, and use means to ensure them. So judgement, of a kind, is necessary.

But ours is a mysterious faith, and above all a paradoxical faith. Pope Francis has made it clear that Christianity is not just a moral code, or a social service. It is a love story.

Legends of the Day of Judgement can persuade us hopelessly to underestimate the love of God, and to underestimate how well he knows us. I quote Rowan Williams: "Jesus's compassion was such that he could be represented by St. John as saying 'I judge no one' ... it is hard not to feel in Our Lord's responses to the sinful, the element of sheer visceral pity to the fore. 'Where are your accusers? Is there no one who condemns you? Neither do I condemn you'. Jesus was tempted as we are: if Gethsemane gives us any insight, he was tried in ways from which most of us would shrink. And what his struggles seem to have produced was a sense of the *precariousness* of goodness, and love and fidelity so strong that no failure or error could provoke his condemnation except the error of those legalists who could not understand that very precariousness". Rowan would, I am sure agree with another very holy man, the late Benedictine monk Father Joe, when he told a penitent "I think there are two types of people in the world. Those who divide the world into two kinds of people, and those who don't". We are not bright white sheep, or pitch black goats. Just varying shades of grey.

Shakespeare, not exactly a holy man but so often one of profound insight, summed up the essential character of Christ's redeeming work in three lines from 'Measure for Measure': --

“Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once,  
And he that might the vantage best have took  
Found out the remedy.”

That remedy is of course the crucifixion and resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Let's see what Paul has to say. Paul, in his letters, writes nothing of the teachings of Christ. He concentrates entirely on what Christ did rather than what He said. His view of Christ is beautifully expressed in these words from Galatians: “I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Those two verbs, Love and Give, are of crucial importance (pun intended) to Paul. They are of course echoed in St John “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life”.

How does God deal with sinners?. Listen to Paul:

From Romans “While we were yet helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Why, one will hardly die for a righteous man – though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us”.

From 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them”.

From Romans again “Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption which is in Jesus Christ”

Grace. God's gift of His oceanic unconditional love. Grace runs like a golden thread through the letters of Paul. Paul emphasises again and again God's unconditional love for us his children, and shows that God's saving grace is his free gift, which cannot be earned by our own efforts, and is emphatically not, subject to terms and conditions. He would have loved the Prologue of John's Gospel: “The word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth ... From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”

I do not believe in a Day of Judgement, but I do believe in judgement, judgement as a continuing process: God's patient, ongoing education, healing us so that we become the persons He wants us to be, persons who accept his love for us and increasingly reciprocate it. If need be this process will continue after we die. The human self, I believe, has two sides to it, two elements. There is the Ego, the first person singular self. The “I” that thinks about itself, observes its own reactions and talks about itself. The self so often tempted by that sin which is the refusal to accept the love of God, itself the source of all human love. Judgement on this self comes from God through the true self, wherein our conscience lies. The true self is, through God's grace, open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, which will nudge, prod, and sometimes painfully jab us when we have strayed into sin.

In the closing passages of Bach's great Passion according to St. John we have in the English translation “Christ in his grave has opened Heaven and closed down Hell”. There's a thought for us goats!

Amen.

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