

Sermon preached at Wymondham Abbey Second Sunday of Advent 2024

The Four Last Things: Judgment

We certainly live in troubled times. I don't need to list the things which worry us. We all see the news. We can be tempted to become cynical, but cynicism is corrosive and dangerous – a sin, we might say. But to people of faith, the things which might tempt us to cynicism might also begin to tempt us to apocalyptic fear. Are we careering into the end times?

Well, people have feared this on a regular basis for most of the last two millennia. And we actually don't know, of course. Crying apocalypse might be like crying wolf. Dangerous when the real thing comes along...

But that talk of the apocalyptic feel of things means that our Advent consideration of the traditional Four Last Things - death, judgment, heaven and hell – is timely and wise.

So today the theme is judgment. The Bible has some tough things to say about judgment. We will be judged (by God). The door is narrow¹. Many are called, but... ²

But there is hope too. God sent Jesus into the world not to condemn it, but to save it, as we hear in John's gospel.³ And as we just heard, John the Baptist – a voice crying in the wilderness – *all flesh shall see the salvation of God*.

How do we balance these things? How do we manage to believe both in the prospect of divine judgment and in everything we hear about God's love and mercy? Well, as I said last week, daring to think about each of these scary-sounding Advent themes leads us, in the end, out of darkness into light. It's why we tackle them in Advent, when we make our way through the wintry darkness into the dazzling light and joy of Christmas.

Jesus seems to be completely straightforward – we will be judged. The language of the narrow door, the locked door, and, in other places, the language of reaping and sickles and harvesting and burning - all this may be figurative, imaginative; but that's because it's almost impossible to talk literally, in the language of this world, about the final things, about the things of the world to come. But the language is imaginative, not imaginary. These things are real. And the language is fearsome because the idea of God not being happy with us is terrifying.

In the Bible, it is God, or sometimes Jesus, who will judge us. So we must never edit God out of the picture and start doing some judging ourselves. Who are we to judge? When we do this, we are playing God. That's called pride, the worst of Christian sins. And Jesus and Paul are both emphatic about this. They repeatedly tell us not to do the judging.

¹ Matthew 7.13-14

² Matthew 22.14

³ John 3.17

The sort of judgment we're forbidden to indulge in is what we might call judgment of someone else's 'salvation-status'. Some people do take it upon themselves to offer this. A friend once showed me a letter from a friend of hers, which contained this line - 'and so if you stay turned from God in this life, he will turn from you in the next, and you will spend an eternity in the torments of hell.' That is quite simply playing God. And, as you will hear in two weeks' time, we should be very careful bandying ideas of eternal torment about.

But here are some words which are much closer to the mark. They are by the mid-20th C. French worker-priest Henri Perrin:

'Our Christianity isn't just rules and ceremonies; it's God's passion for this bloody world and the whole of squabbling mankind; it's the work of Christ who takes the love of those poor people in charge, and it's a love that neither you nor I can judge, because God alone can read a human heart and see, perhaps, the greatest love when we see only defects and weaknesses.

So let's leave the adding-up to God. His scales aren't the same as ours. All that's asked of us is to love mankind with passion, and show it that Christ's love burns.'

'Christ's love burns'. At the heart of this is the good news that God who will judge us one day is the God who leaves the door open to penitence, saying sorry, time after time after time. His mercy is beyond measure. We fall, we reach out and he picks us up. Every day, every hour of the day. And when each of us comes to judgment it will be before the Lord who loves us in infinite, intimate detail, and who knows our hearts and minds better than we know them ourselves.⁴ It will be before the Lord who came to save the world, not condemn it. It will be before the Lord who was lifted up to draw all people, all of us, to himself.⁵ It will be before the Lord who will 'save those who are eagerly waiting for him'.⁶

Also: whenever we hear that language of God's judgment, remember that the original Greek NT word has a rich meaning. It's not just a legalistic word. It's also about discernment, or fine discrimination or critical analysis (indeed, we get the word critical from that Greek word for judge). That's about God's infinitely detailed knowledge of each of us, a knowledge powered by unstoppable love. That's very different from an angry deity banging his celestial gavel. Judgment need not mean condemnation. Greek again – they are different words!

So let us dare to believe that Jesus is indeed drawing us and all people to himself. And in response let us dare to be beacons of God's love and mercy. Let us dare to stay on that hard road of discipleship, a road we're on together. Let us dare to be in that great stream of pilgrims – journeying on, and bringing others along too.

⁴ Psalm 139

⁵ John 12.32

⁶ Hebrews 9.28