16 December 2018: Choral Matins
The Third Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 25: 1-9; 1 Cor. 4: 1-5
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“It is the Lord who judges me” (1 Cor. 4: 4)

Heaven and hell, death and judgement. These were the great four themes of Advent sermons but so often today they get lost in our rush to Christmas, whether the mulled wine and bright lights of the Christmas markets in Broad Street or the perfectly tuned harmonies of our Choir’s Christmas concerts. Judgement and its consequences feel a bit too likely to put us off our Sunday dinners.

But we need judgement. Without judgement God would not be God, good and evil wouldn’t matter.

The problem tends to be that when we start thinking about judgement, we forget about God and get it all wrong. What we must remember is that our understanding of God must define what we think about judgement, not the other way round. We should never let our fallen understanding of human judgement define what we think about God.

Most notions of Hell come not from the Bible but from Greek and Roman myths. Tartarus and Hades. Lands populated by Furies and Harpies, demons fitting souls to macabre tasks rolling Sisyphean stones endlessly up hills or being tantalised by sweet grapes ever beyond their reach. Such notions came precisely because the Greeks and Romans could only imagine their gods as humans writ large. Great beings with all the same passions, lusts and pettinesses as us but on a much grander scale. And so their judgement, their punishment could only ever be human judgement on the grand scale.

If we start with what we know about judgement and project it onto God, we might think that being a Christian is like doing a college collection, where every thought, word and action is marked according to some angelic examination protocol. But Christian life is not an exam.
If we start with what we know about God, who is ultimate goodness but becomes human for us – becomes Jesus for us so that we might not just know the Truth as something abstract but love him as a friend –, then we see that Christian life is all about encountering Christ, the Image of God, his Word and his Truth. And judgement too is about that encounter. That’s why Jesus says so many things about judgement that don’t seem to make sense at first. He often points to a future judgement, a time when the good will be divided from the bad and yet he also insists that the world has already been judged. “Those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the Son of God.”, Jesus says in John 3 (Jn. 3: 18).

Christ does not judge us, rather he is judgement. It might seem a fine distinction but it’s important. Christ is the benchmark, model and standard by which we are judged. Christ alone is saved and we are saved insofar as we are in him, of him and like him. And that is why St Paul can deem it such “a very small thing” to “be judged by [the Corinthians] or any human court“ (1 Cor. 4: 3). For we are not little immortal things who need to be sent this way or that to await our fate. Rather God alone is immortal and only by being in him, do we become immortal and born to eternal life. And that happens by becoming like him, by being changed into the image of Christ who is the image of the invisible God.

Imagine a sculptor, the great Michelangelo perhaps, hard at work in his studio. A new block of stone is brought in. Marked, stained, chipped and cracked. It’s an ugly mess, not fit for anything in its present state. But the sculptor looks deep within the stone and sees a lion waiting to be released. He sets to work with hammer and chisel and from the worthless block, he sets free the beautiful lion that he and only he always knew lay within.

Paul says we contain within ourselves the image of God but it has become marred, deformed. Judgement is about the separation of the true self which God gave to each one of us – the person we could be but so rarely are – from all the dross and rubbish.

Jesus tended to prefer agricultural metaphors. He said each of us is like a field, in which God has sown wonderful and wholesome plants (Mt. 13: 24-30). But the Enemy came at night and sowed terrible weeds amongst the crop and God had no choice but to let the two grow up together. Destroying the weeds would kill the good plants too. That parable does not describe two sorts of people, good and bad, living alongside one another, so much as one person, whose God-given goodness is always at risk from the evil thoughts
and actions which do not come from God. In this life, God lets us go on as we are – forcibly destroying our sinfulness would mean destroying our goodness too. But at the judgement, things are not so. At the judgement, when the harvest comes – the good and the evil are separated and only the good survives.

When we think of judgement then we must not think of “them and us”, of good people and bad people, but of how much we still need to be reshaped by our ongoing encounter with Christ so that we may be like him. When we are judged, all that is in us that is not of Christ, that is not in his image, will be destroyed. And what then will be left?

For some the moment will be joyful and freeing, for others good but with a sense of loss, of a painful process of transformation, for yet others it may feel like the worst of evils as all that they valued about themselves, the falsehood and wickedness that they had built up as their idea of who they are is stripped away. Heaven, purgatory, hell these are not places but ways of relating to God. As Hans Urs von Balthasar put it, “God is the Last Thing of the creature: gained he is paradise, lost, he is hell; demanding, he is judgement; purifying he is purgatory.” Judgement is the fullness of encounter with God, when we shall see him as he is, face to face and we shall know even as we are fully known (1 Cor. 13: 12). We shall know, Paul says. We shall know not just the fullness of God but the fullness of ourselves, who we really are in comparison to him. And if Christ does not work on us like a sculptor on a block of stone to shape us to be like him, then that moment of true encounter will be more than we can bear.

There is right and wrong. Though it’s hard to tell which is which because all our eyes are blinded by sin. Truth and goodness are absolutes but we cannot go condemning others for their failure to live up to them (Mt. 7: 1). We can only ever look to ourselves (Mt. 7: 5). And the more we look to ourselves and ask God to shape us like his Son, the more we will find ourselves pleading for mercy on others no matter how great their sins.

And it was in this sense that many in the Early Church took to heart Jesus’ words that he had come to save not the church but the world and drew such wonderful paintings of the harrowing of Hell. They saw that if Christ was the Word of God through whom all things and all people were made, then his mark is on all peoples, all times, all cultures. Baptism then is more than a moment of being saved; it is the moment we respond to being saved by working with Christ for the salvation of others. Yeast, salt, light that is what Christ says Christians are to be (Mt. 5: 13-16), not a holy few plucked out from the multitude of the evil but the means by which all are made holy.
Our blessing is not to escape judgement but to know that judgement now. For we know Christ now and with his help may grow daily ever more like him. And when we die and are confronted by what it is to go on becoming more like him for all eternity, it will not be pain and torment to let go of our false selves but the fullness of joy in his presence (Ps. 16: 11).