

**Sermon – The City New Year Service
St Michael’s Cornhill, London
Friday 8th January 2016**

Judgement

The Most Revd Dr Barry Morgan, Archbishop of Wales

“*Cheer them up*” said Bishop Stephen to me when he wrote asking me to preach at this service to commemorate the beginning of a new year. And then he made the task virtually impossible by giving me readings from Ecclesiastes – “*there is a time to live and a time to die*” and the parable of the sheep and goats which is a parable about judgement at the end of time, which for anyone with even a twinge of conscience can cause shivers to run down the spine.

Why? – Because the New Testament seems to endorse a final judgement that will separate sheep from goats, people to either eternal bliss or eternal punishment where there will be torment and a gnashing of teeth. And this will be determined by our relationship with Jesus, so that the acceptance of His message seems to decide our fate.

And we are all familiar with paintings, both in museums and churches, depicting hell as a place of blazing furnaces and suffering, where the wicked are punished for their misdeeds. A Sunday School teacher once told me that God will have recorded every single word and action of mine in His ledger and depending on the balance of good and evil, I would end up either in heaven or roasting in hell. I did not sleep that night or for several nights afterwards.

And the image of God that many people have is of a God who is angry, vengeful, spiteful, and quick to judge. Just look at the people who commit the most terrible atrocities supposedly in the name of God. But the truth is we all have a tendency to project onto God our own fears and fantasies.

A recent confirmation candidate told me that she had long wanted to make a Christian commitment but believed that because she had lived a somewhat less than perfect life, and been to prison, that she

would never be acceptable in God’s eyes. What image of God then had been communicated to her?

But I can still hear you asking, what will happen to us at the time of judgement? Of course, no-one can know exactly because, as St Paul puts it, “*We see through a glass darkly*” and New Testament images use pictorial language when talking of judgement, as of so much else, so that we cannot know with any certainty what form judgement will take.

And yet Christians believe that we have an indication about the kind of God, God is, when we consider the teaching and life of Jesus who said that God was like the loving father who ran out to meet his errant son when he saw him coming home or the good shepherd who searched for his one lost sheep. God said Jesus was full of compassion and mercy, more ready to forgive than to judge and punish.

And God’s resurrection of Jesus endorses Jesus’ depiction of God’s nature. Had God raised King Herod from the dead, He would have been endorsing tyranny, cruelty and terror but He did not – He raised Jesus.

Jesus, for us, is God’s human face and judgement is the realisation that we shall ultimately have to come to terms with His values and recognise as well how far we fall short of them. And if mercy, love and compassion are God’s values, it ought to make a difference to the way we live our lives now. For if we know that the future is God’s and it has to do with compassion, love and forgiveness that affects or ought to affect our present as well. If that is the shape of things to come, then life in the present needs to be shaped in the light of that future that is both ours and God’s.

As disciples of Jesus we need to exemplify and embody the victory of love over hatred, charity over greed, selflessness over self-seeking, humility over pride, peace over war, justice over injustice and a continual reliance on God’s grace to help us in our daily lives, not just personally but corporately as well. In God’s Kingdom there cannot be happiness and wellbeing for some unless there is happiness

and wellbeing for all for we are all made in God's likeness and all of us are His sons and daughters.

Zechariah in his prophecy compares God's Kingdom to a city where it is safe for old people to sit in the streets and where children can play – in other words, our lives together need to ensure that everyone is treated as bearers of God's image.

Insofar as we fail to live in this way – preferring darkness to light as the Gospel of John puts it, we are already judged; judged not so much by God but by ourselves, by our failure to respond to the love which created us and cutting ourselves off from God and living lives turned in on ourselves.

It is often when we meet somebody who is genuinely good and compassionate that we realise our own shortcomings and find ourselves judged not so much by what that person says or does but by the kind of person he or she is and the same will be true when we meet God face to face.

It is exemplified for me in the haunting account in the gospels of Peter's three-fold denial of Jesus, as Jesus predicted he would. When that happens and the cock crows for the second time, Jesus turns and looks at Peter and Peter breaks down weeping because he realises the enormity of his betrayal. Jesus did not have to utter a word. But it is Peter and his fellow disciples who are then entrusted with the Gospel of Jesus after His resurrection.

But of course it is possible that even when we eventually come face to face with God, we may fail to respond to His love and we do not know what will happen then, for God respects our freewill too much to force us to accept Him and His values. The freedom He gives us to respond or not to His goodness and love in this life may also be true at the time of judgement. What then?

The clue again lies in the person of Jesus. In Him we see God's love as a love that will not let us go. Can the God that through Jesus talks about forgiving seventy times seven, in other words, without end, stop trying to persuade us of His love so that even if we give up on Him, God will never give up on us? Do not the cross and the

resurrection demonstrate the lengths to which God's love is prepared to persevere and persist even forgiving those responsible for the crucifixion?

If God's purpose in creating us was to enable us to share and reflect His love, it must surely mean that however we respond, His light and love will continue or else evil triumphs over goodness. As somebody put it *"If we turn our backs on sheer goodness, sheer goodness waits, and with hands outstretched waits forever"*.

Judgement, of course, will still be difficult for we will have to come to terms with our failure to live in the way we were meant to. Yet God is, according to Scripture, a God who continually saves, redeems and renews. If that is so, then it is a message of hope if not of cheer, since the God of Jesus is long suffering and of great kindness whose love and compassion are inexhaustible. Thank God then that He has eternity to work on us but an eternity that has to begin now.