

The second on our Advent theme, the Four Last Things, is Judgement. Make no mistake: there will be a judgement and we shall all face it. The Bible is explicit:

And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world... Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

Most modern Christians – and especially the so-called *liberals* who have all but destroyed the church – don't believe in the Judgement. They demythologise it into a psychological process so that they can easily dismiss it. These modern debunkers are not alone. There were many even among the friends of Samuel Johnson. Johnson did not share the fashionable 18th century sophistication and the tendency to regard religious doctrines as if they were metaphors. He was once in a discussion and he turned morose.

A lady asked him what was the matter and he said, *I think I may be damned.*

She said, *What do you mean, Sir, to be damned?*

He replied: *Sent to hell and punished everlastingly.*

The lady protested: *You seem Sir to forget the merits of our Redeemer.*

Johnson was in tears, and he said vehemently: *I do not forget the merits of our Redeemer. But our Redeemer has said that he will set some at his right hand and some at his left.*

We have been warned. There are dozens of biblical prophecies of Judgement. And when it comes to prophecy, the Bible has a good record. You can check just how many of its prophecies have come true already. And here is St John the Divine in *The Book of Revelation* on the subject of Judgement:

Behold he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him, and they also which pierced him: and all kindreds of the earth shall wail because of him.

And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life...and whosoever was not found written in the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.

The Gospel says, *There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

The Reverend Ian Paisley preached a famous open-air sermon on this: *There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

An old lady heckled from the back: *What about those who have no teeth?*

Paisley replied: *tayeth will be pruvoided!*

At Enfield, Connecticut, on 8th July 1741, Jonathan Edwards preached about the Judgement and he said:

O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and nothing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the flames of wrath, nothing of your own, nothing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment.

So is that it? Are we all damned then? We are certainly all sinners. St Paul says: *All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.* We cannot escape condemnation on our own merits. But there is One who does have merits. As St Paul says again, miraculously: *God commendeth his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

This is the great mystery of our redemption. And of it Karl Barth says: *God does not withhold or stay his judgement. He pronounces fully our most deserved condemnation. But because of Jesus Christ, we experience God's judgement not as condemnation, but as forgiveness.*

How can we understand this? The essence of all true religious experience is imagination. As Samuel Coleridge told us: imagination is not the same as mere fancy; it makes real within us the reality which is outside us. You have to brood over the sacred texts and focus your mind, all your attention, on what they say. Repeat every word slowly to yourself as if memorising a poem. Take that warning which the priest gives to the couple at *The Solemnisation of Matrimony*:

...as ye will answer at the dreadful Day of Judgement, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed.

Now there's a phrase for the imagination to play on: *when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed.*

That is what it will be like. At the Judgement, we shall suddenly know our own inwardness completely and utterly. Our souls will be laid bare. We shall even know those things about ourselves that we have must studiously tried to hide from ourselves, because they are too painful to bear. Our sins. Rightly the Prayer Book says: *The remembrance of them is grievous to us; the burden of them is intolerable.* And the key word is *disclosed*. Not only shall we know the innermost secrets of our hearts but, in that library of God when the books are opened, everyone else – our neighbours, friends and enemies – will know our secrets too. What then?

And last, the rending pain of re-enactment of all that you have done, and been; the shame of motives late revealed, and the awareness of things ill done and done to others' harm which once you took for exercise of virtue. Then fools' approval stings, and honour stains. From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire where you must move in measure like a dancer.

This is the centre of it. God does not judge us. At the Last Judgement, we shall come to see ourselves as we really are: the veneer will be stripped away. Our appalling mask of self-esteem will be seen for the filthy rags it always was. The difference, you might say, between the sheep and the goats, is that the goats never see themselves as they really are. They preserve their veneer of supposed niceness, their

poisonous self-esteem to the last cornice. And they go through life feeling good about themselves, as they have been encouraged to do by all the psychologists and counsellors. But they are on *the primrose path to the everlasting bonfire*. And the only reason they cannot be forgiven is that they do not think they need forgiveness. This is the direct route to hell. The Judgement is an offence to their pride. But we have been warned: *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us*

The sheep – the ones on his right hand – are by the grace of God – gaining some of that final insight in the here and now. When we begin truly to see ourselves as we are, and to realise that *we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves*. When we understand that it is Jesus Christ alone who saves us, then we are seeing something of the Last Judgement now. We turn to him when we realise that he is the One, the Saviour. We cannot save ourselves. And we begin to make weak, shy and timid steps to where he holds out to us his Body and Blood. We do this like a child learning to walk.

We learn to lean on Him. When we begin to receive his love as the cure of all our woe, we begin ever so weakly to love Him, even a little to start to love our neighbour, who is made in his image.

These are only hints and guesses, hints followed by guesses; and the rest is prayer, observance, discipline, thought and action.

Thou knowest, Lord, the secrets of our hearts; shut not thy merciful ears to our prayer; but spare us, Lord most holy, O God most mighty, O holy and merciful Saviour, thou most worthy Judge eternal, suffer us not, at our last hour, for any pains of death to fall from thee.