

Today we turn to the second of the Four Last Things: Judgement. As soon as children learn to speak they cry out those words all parents hear a thousand times: *It's not fair!* The desire for justice, for fairness and right dealing goes deep and it is the basis of the faith of the Old Testament and of Islam. For the Jews after Moses, what guarantees justice and right judgment is the Law, based on the Ten Commandments. This Law is not at all like modern ethics which are merely utilitarian; in which moral decisions are infinitely various and all that matters is that the ends justify the means.

This is applied to license all manner of atrocities. So embryos may be created in the sure and certain knowledge that some of them will be killed in the process of scientific research. The former Bishop of Oxford, Lord Harris, justified this on Thought for the Day by arguing that many embryos die naturally anyhow. Which is a bit like saying that accidentally falling under a bus is the same thing as being pushed. Or twelve year old girls are given the morning after pill. Or we murder 200,000 unborn children every year, because pregnancy would interfere with a woman's lifestyle. *The Times* ran a piece this week celebrating the fact that Britain leads the world in the amount and variations of casual sex. Or it is thought right, because it looks convenient, to build the economy on debt – that is on fictitious money – without reckoning the long-term consequences: because, *in the long term we'll all be dead*. What John Maynard Keynes did not add, of course, is that after death there will be judgement. Nietzsche was right to deplore this hedonistic creed as *pig philosophy*.

Contrasted with modern ethics stands the Law of God. The moral rules are not infinitely variable: some things are right in themselves. The Commandments are binding. God did not give us the Ten Suggestions. He said *Thou shalt not*. And the Law of God is timeless and universal. As Eliot put it: *There is no life not lived in community; and no community not lived in praise of God*. There was a terrific philosophical howler perpetrated by John Humphrys on this theme in his book last year when he said that of course it's possible to have true morality without believing in God: lots of civilised societies have disbelieved in God. It was left to Mary Wakefield to point out that it's not a question of *believing in God* but of *the existence of God*. This is to say that ethics is deontological. Ethics derives from being. And the being ethics derives from is God. Without God there is no possibility of goodness.

The modern interpretation of Law not as obedience but only as a means to hedonistic ends results in the depraved notion of universal human rights: depraved because illogical and incoherent. For, if I have a right to behave in such and such a way, then it automatically implies that someone else has the responsibility to guarantee me that right. Contradictions are bound to arise. I claim a right to peace and quiet but my neighbour Mr Cacophonous infests the atmosphere with nauseating rock music – on the grounds that to forbid him would deny him the right of freedom of expression. So the doctrine of universal human rights can never be an ethical principle but only a wish list – an impossible cloud cuckoo land.

The ideas of justice and judgement meant that everyone shall get what he deserves. This produced an intellectual and moral crisis which only the coming of Christianity could resolve. For the question arises: *Do you really want to get what you deserve?* I certainly hope I don't get what I deserve. For I am only too conscious of the fact that I

so regularly – and, most annoyingly, repetitively, leave undone the things I ought to have done and do the things I ought not to have done. I fall short – just like you. In biblical language, I am a sinner. And, if I am to be saved from myself, I need more than the Law – which I cannot always keep. I require mercy.

But mercy is bought at a price. Not even God can say, *OK I'll simply let you off*. For that would abrogate his eternal Law. So how can we uphold the integrity of the Law and at the same time guarantee the salvation of sinners like you and me: sinners in fact like all humankind? The first person to address this problem was St Paul, some twenty years after the Crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. He wrote:

*The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the Law. But thanks be to God which giveth us the victory through Our Lord Jesus Christ. St Paul says also: God commendeth his love toward us that that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

St Paul worked out in detail the means whereby we are redeemed. He based his reasoning of course on the words of Our Lord himself who promised: *God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish but have everlasting life.*

What I find so moving and so telling, so completely convincing, is that this truth was prophesied by Isaiah five hundred years before either Jesus or St Paul. For Isaiah knew too that we fall short, we cannot save ourselves. And the amazing thing is that all those centuries before the events he saw in precise detail what God would do to save us:

*He is led as a lamb to the slaughter. Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.*

These words are no coincidence. We are not being merely fanciful here. Isaiah foresees the death of Christ in exact detail – even to predicting the emergence of the thieves on the crosses and Joseph of Arimathea.

This week at Evensong we had the story of Abraham and Isaac, when God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac and then at the last minute provides a ram for the sacrifice instead. The overwhelming purpose of this story – from more than fifteen hundred years before the birth of Christ – is to prefigure the fact that God would sacrifice his own Son.

But one enormous problem remains. If God punishes the sinless Christ in order to save sinful men and women, surely he abrogates his own immutable Law of justice? For it cannot be right to punish the innocent for the sins of the guilty. The fact is that there is no fracture of the Law of justice. Because Christ is not other than God. Again as St Paul puts it:

*God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.*

When you contemplate the mystery of our redemption, deep matters give way to even greater depths. For consider this: when God made all things, he also made time. God himself is outside and beyond time. This means that, before the heavens and the earth were brought forth, God knew from everlasting that his act of creation would involve his own ultimate sacrifice. There was the knowledge of Calvary in the mind of God “before” the foundation of the universe.

The miracle of the Divine compassion, of God’s extreme tenderness and love towards us, is that he went ahead anyway. He thought we were worth it.