

Judgement

“He will come in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end”

Daniel 7:9-14

2 Tim 4:1-5

John 8: 2-11

[in place of Matt 25:31-46]

The promise of Jesus' return and final judgment.
Exploring the concepts of judgment, justice, and mercy.
Reflecting on how the expectation of Christ's return should affect our lives.

“It’s not FAIR!!!!”

Anyone who has spent more than about 10 minutes with two or more young children will recognise the agonised scream.

At which point the concerned parent/ grandparent/ friend/ other steps in and tries to determine the cause of the grief, which leads to

“I was doing this, and then he/she did that, and now it’s all spoiled and IT’S NOT FAIR”

And then child 2 steps in with their side of the story and soon it’s all chaos and it’s your job as the responsible adult to reinforce the “how we play nicely together” rules, ensure a meaningful “I’m sorry”, “that’s ok” reconciliation takes place, and restore order.

And possibly to plan for a stiff drink when they are finally all in bed.

“Justice”. There’s something hard-wired into us as human beings that craves justice. A desire to see “right” prevailing over “wrong”.

And it won’t surprise you to find out that, as a follower of Jesus, I believe that this comes from God – the God who loves and values each and every person he has made, and who longs for us, his people, to love and value each other too. Whether they are “like us” or not.

Justice matters to God. And the administration of justice requires some form of judgement. Of looking at evidence and weighing it up against the way that God wants us to be.

And that sounds scary – because at heart I suspect we each know that we’ve fallen short. And because we’re probably aware of some pretty heavy passages of Scripture – not to mention terrifying mediaeval images - which threaten all sorts of dreadful things. So maybe it’s also human nature to shy away from thinking about judgement at all.

But, as they say, there's safety in numbers, and there are a fair few of us here today, so let's have a go and see where we get to, as our sermon series on The Nicene Creed reaches the statement

“[Jesus] will return in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.”

Last week we heard about Jesus' ascension into heaven.

The reading from Daniel which we have just heard kind of provides the “heavenly view” of that same event. Of Jesus – the “one like a human being” (or as some translations have it “one like a Son of Man) returning to his father God, and becoming King. Receiving authority over God's eternal Kingdom of love, justice, mercy and peace.

And prior to that, this “court scene” of judgement of an arrogant beast. What's all that about then?

Well, this is actually part of a longer passage in which Daniel recounts a vision he's had in which he sees into “God's space” “God's reality”. What we would probably call heaven.

The problem for us is that God is way, way beyond human understanding. Ordinary words and descriptions just don't apply. Just like the writers of Ezekiel and Revelation, who have similar experiences, the best Daniel can do is to use symbols, images and picture language - some (most?) of which are pretty weird...

And so, unless you are a biblical scholar, probably the best approach to these passages is to ignore the detail about beast, dragons and the like, take the wide view, and ask “what's really going on here?”

And it seems likely that Daniel is talking about huge cosmic spiritual forces. Things which, maybe for obvious reasons, we don't often talk about. Ultimately, although different people will have different understandings of the form that evil takes, this is a reminder that evil is real.

And that God is implacably opposed to evil.

And that ultimately, evil will be entirely and utterly defeated, and darkness will be swallowed up in God's eternal light.

And maybe when we think about “Judgement” it's this sort of scene that we have in mind.

And yet, this is not a picture of individuals standing before God. It's a picture of the reality of evil, and how it is condemned and utterly removed by the power of God.

Perhaps it's more helpful to look at this as the condemnation of the malign forces which come together to make this world such a mess. The greed, violence, self-centredness and hate which seeks to infect and take over individuals, people-groups and entire nations.

So – that’s one picture of judgement. Of God’s judgement and condemnation of all that is evil.

But the NT passage makes it clear that there will also be a calling to account for individual human beings. And that the judge will be Jesus himself. After all, part of the responsibilities of the Sovereign is to ensure that justice is done – and seen to be done.

[Picture on screen is from the Central Criminal Court / Old Bailey]

So – yes, as Christians we believe that we will be called to account for our lives and how we have lived them. The choices we have made. The actions we have taken – and not taken.

And that is uncomfortable.

After all, most of us hate seeing ourself in a photo or looking in a mirror, because despite our internal image of what we look like, the reality is often quite different.

The thought of having a mirror held up to our lives and actions and having to account for them for them is pretty much intolerable. For at heart we know that we constantly fall short of God’s ideal.

And yet, there are two very important things we need to remember when we’re thinking about this

Firstly – that Jesus will be our judge. And Jesus knows us inside out.

He knows what we are truly sorry for.

He knows what has shaped us in our lives. And what has damaged and mis-shapen us.

He knows that in all the mess of the world, sometimes there are not ‘right’ solutions – only least bad ones

He knows what it is to be human

He knows the true “me” at the core of each one of us

And he loves us regardless

And secondly - because of that, he went to the cross and died for us, so that all the ways in which we fall short can be – and are – forgiven when we turn to him.

We do not need to be afraid, for this is what God’s grace looks like.

So, we’ve thought about the judgement of evil

And about individuals being held to account for their lives

Both of which we might think of as being associated with the ‘second coming’, or the ‘end times’, when God sets everything right for once and for all.

But there is a third way in which we can think about Jesus judging, and that’s in the Gospel story we had this morning. And this is not so much a “looking back on” type of judgement, but more a guiding and shaping type of judgement. Something which is on-going through our lives, and helps us to live more in the way God wants us to live.

I'm sure you know the story. It's generally agreed that this is a 'set up' – the Pharisees have arranged for the woman to be caught so they can 'put Jesus on the spot'. It's their own form of trial with (apparently) no good outcome for Jesus.

Either he condemns the woman and is shown to lack the compassion he so often preaches about

Or he refuses to condemn her, in which case he is clearly setting himself up against the Law of Moses and hence cannot be from God.

But Jesus does neither. He kneels and writes in the dust. What does he write? We don't know. Maybe just by his action he is reminding everyone that human beings are ultimately made from dust. All mortal. All fallible.

And then when the Pharisees keep pressing him, he invites them to hold up a mirror on themselves. To reflect, we might say. Are they completely without sin? Are they really in a position to judge? And slowly, oldest (and possibly wisest) first, they melt away.

Does Jesus condemn the Pharisees? Well no – he doesn't. He gives them a way and an opportunity to review themselves. To learn for themselves how to come closer towards how God wants us to live. Focussing on living positive lives of love, kindness and generosity, rather than homing in on the perceived failings of others. How different would our world be if we all focussed less on what divides us, and more on what unites us?

And when they have gone, Jesus addresses the woman. He neither condones nor condemns her – simply sets her free. Gives her the chance to make a fresh start. I have read this story so many times, and heard Jesus final words to the woman – “do not sin again” as a strict warning. And yet when I read it this time it seemed to me that Jesus might just as well have been saying it in the way a coach might speak to a sportsperson, or a teacher to a student. “Try it this way instead – I think you will find it works better.”

And we may not have Jesus standing in the dust directly in front of us. But we do have the Holy Spirit living within us – prompting us, guiding us, encouraging us. Setting us free from the negativity that holds us back. The “not-good-enough” stories that have defined us. The fear of being judged and found wanting.

The promptings of the Spirit may be challenging, but they will only ever be encouraging. The other thoughts – those which tell us we are useless, worthless, we can't do it – they are not from God, and we really don't need to listen to them. In fact, we need NOT to listen to them. And if you are struggling with them, please seek support from someone you trust.

The challenge from the Spirit comes to help us to grow and to flourish.

So -we've thought about Judgement from three different viewpoints

In terms of the final ending of all that is evil, and of Jesus reigning as king in God's eternal kingdom of love, justice, mercy and peace

And then in terms of us all giving an account of our lives to Jesus as our loving, merciful Judge and source of grace

And we've also thought about how the Holy Spirit works in us through our lives to help us to assess how we can live more Jesus-like lives.

And hopefully we have come to a place where we can see God's judgement not as something to be feared, but as part of God's great desire for justice in all creation. So that ultimately no-one needs to say – "It's not fair."

So let's take a moment to allow all that to sink in, and then we'll sum it up in prayer

Beloved God
We fear your judgement
Teach us to know it as our friend.
Your word has pierced us to the bone;
We are exposed, laid open to your sight.

Therefore, let us bless you
For you come to us when we are most ashamed;
And when we long to hide our face from you
You will not suffer us to turn away.

You call us by our name
You touch us, raise us,
Invite us into shame-less love.

God, our lover, know us, judge us,
Turn us, wound us, demand of us,
Forgive us.

We are yours
We abandon ourselves to your love
We trust you.

From The Pattern of Our Days, The Iona Community.