

Chapel of St Peter and St Paul, ORNC

11.00am Choral Eucharist

Third Sunday of Advent [15 December 2024]

readings: Zephaniah 3. 14-end; Philippians 4. 4-7; Luke 3. 7-18

In a season packed with nativity plays and carol services and holiday parties, it's sometimes easy to forget that traditionally Advent has not only been about looking back to Christ's birth at Bethlehem, but also about looking forward to his return at the Second Coming. For this reason, it wasn't so long ago that sermons in Advent still addressed what are known as The Four Last Things, that is, death, judgment, heaven, and hell. Because, of course, throughout most of Christian history, these matters have not been mere theological abstractions but rather immediate realities: death has been ever-present in life, just as judgment and the afterlife have gripped the popular imagination far more than they do at the present time. But just as our society has become progressively better at managing death, so it seems that we in the Church have become increasingly vague about what to expect when death has arrived. After all, isn't the concept of judgment itself rather out of step with our modern sensibility, a holdover from a more oppressive and unforgiving age? Might we even go so far as to say that the very promise of judgment has been a form of social control, with the Church keeping people compliant under the threat of their own damnation? Moreover, if Christ himself still hasn't made his re-appearance after 2,000 years, maybe our inherited concern with the Second Coming and the Last Judgment has all been badly misplaced. With such a long track record of anxiety and gloom trailing behind us, who wouldn't rather focus on the Christ child, that gentle and reassuring sign of God's love at work among us?

Still, if we look closely at today's scripture readings, then we soon realise that divine judgment is both more complicated and more hopeful than we tend to assume. Admittedly, the prophetic language of the Old Testament seems to confirm the view of judgment as something to be feared, a divine reckoning with human sin that has direct and often violent consequences. So it is that the people of Israel are assured that if they're obedient to God, they will prosper, and if they are not, then they will suffer. At the same time, however, there's always the possibility of mercy: God's judgment may never cease, but equally, God may choose not to impose its logical results. Which is why in today's reading from Zephaniah, the people are called by the prophet to rejoice and to exalt, because 'the Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has cast out your enemies' (3.15). Nonetheless, judgment itself remains central to the divine-human relationship, as is made clear by John the Baptist in this morning's passage from the Gospel of Luke. Confronted with all the pious people seeking his baptism in the River Jordan, John is unequivocal: 'You brood of vipers!' he shouts. 'Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?' (3.7). Again, there's absolutely no doubt here, but that everyone will be held accountable for his or her own actions. And this means that when the long-awaited messiah finally arrives, he will use his winnowing fork to separate the wheat from the chaff, which is another way of saying that he will judge between the righteous from the unrighteous, and the unrighteous will be punished. But then comes the surprising remark that draws the episode to a close. Having just recounted all the threats and warnings John has issued to the crowd, the Gospel writer concludes: 'so, with many other exhortations, he preached good news to the people' (vv.17-18).

Now, if you're anything like me, you may well be wondering what exactly the good news is that's supposed to be on offer here. Yet the fact that the promise of judgment is assumed to be part of a larger message of hope – it's this assumption that invites us, I think, to look again at what judgment is all about. Is it really about nothing more than having our sins written down and then tallied up as evidence for whether we go to hell or to heaven? Or might it be about something both less quantifiable but also more expansive? Surely it needs to be the latter, if we finally believe that what God most wants for us is to be reconciled, both to God and to each other. Saying this,

however, doesn't mean that the need for accountability has disappeared, or that we cease to be responsible for the kind of life that we ultimately choose to lead. What it does mean is that we can approach the judgment of God no longer as something to be feared or despised, but rather as something for which we can actually be grateful. Not because the process of stripping away all our selfishness and pride and indulgence is likely to be pleasant, but rather because we know – deep down – that it's only on the other side of these things that real life is waiting for us. It's in this way that divine judgment ceases to be a threat that hangs over us and instead becomes a gift, the gift of being reconciled with God. And we don't have to wait for Christ to come again to experience this reconciliation – it's something that arrived 2,000 years ago with the birth of a little boy at Bethlehem. Joy and judgment go hand in hand, just as our sin and God's forgiveness are forever bound to one another. Knowing this is that wisdom of which our Collect prayer speaks today, the wisdom of knowing that God is our judge and we are always at God's mercy. This is the gift of Christ himself that will ensure, as the Collect says, 'that at thy second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in thy sight'. Amen.