

Christ the King A
November 19, 2017

Proper 29/Grace Church
Fr. James/Lexington

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24 Psalm 100 Ephesians 1:15-23 *Matthew 25:31-46*

The Final Judgement

Matthew's description of the the final judgement stands alone among the Gospels of the New Testament. There are several points made in the passage: The first is the unquestioned position of the Son of Man. The second is that judgement will be made on the basis of our lives. The third is that of acknowledgement of the choice we have made either to eternal punishment or eternal life.

This is the feast of Christ the King. At this point in the final days of the world as we have known it, Jesus will be accorded by his Father the position of ultimate political and spiritual power. All other rulers will be subject to the Son of Man, Jesus the Anointed One. Matthew writes that he will come in his glory, and he will sit on the throne of his glory. Glory here is sometimes translated 'splendor.' More to the point, perhaps, is that the word "magnificence" is the key, overwhelming magnificence. I have been reading in the Apocryphal book of Esther, and in the midst of

the trauma set for her people, that is, death to all on a set day, Esther takes the risk to approach the king even though she knows full and well that to approach him without being summoned is to incur his wrath and certain death unless he is compassionate and holds out his scepter to her. She goes anyway and when coming before him sees that he is blazing with anger and immediately faints dead away. The king is so concerned that he leaves his throne and comes to her taking her in his arms to arouse her and assist her to her feet. Her explanation is “I saw you, my lord, like an angel of God, and my heart was shaken with fear at your glory. For you are wonderful, my lord, and your countenance is full of grace.” And then she fainted away again. This is not at all romantic language. Esther was not in love with the king as we think of romantic love. No. And this is just an ordinary king, one without divine attributes at all. Imagine how we will feel as we come before him in all of his heavenly splendor—one to whom we will justly give adoration, and before whom we will experience complete and total undeservedness. Our mental pictures of Jesus

the man, as one totally approachable, amenable to speech with anyone, this no longer fits into this scene of divine judgement. Here he is part of the very glory of the throne of his Father. It is a context beyond our experience, beyond human experience.

A great Christian writer that most of you know wrote a brilliant children's fantasy called "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe." And it sets a context beyond human experience. C.S. Lewis tells the story of a great Lion whose roar shakes the very foundations of the forest. At the beginning of the book four children are playing in their uncle's wardrobe when they discover it is a doorway to Narnia. But as they enter Narnia they learn it is under the spell of a wicked witch. It is a depressing land. Lucy, the youngest of the four, says that in Narnia under the witch it is always winter but never Christmas.

The children hear rumors that Aslan, the great Lion, will soon return to the forest so they devise a plan to overthrow the witch. But chaos enters in when the younger boy Edmund commits treason and joins the witch plunging all of Narnia deeper into the

witch's spell. When Aslan returns he frees Edmund from the clutches of the witch.

I love what happens next. The witch requests an audience with Aslan and talks to him about the deep magic from the dawn of time. She says, and I quote, "You at least know the magic which the Emperor [that's God the Father] put into Narnia at the very beginning. You know that every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey and that for every treachery I have a right to a kill."

Aslan agrees and Edmund is to be sacrificed on the Stone Table, a large ritual stone that has always been in Narnia. But then something unexpected and horrible happens. Aslan offers to be sacrificed in place of Edmund. The witch is delighted to be rid of Aslan once for all. He is bound, humiliated before the Witch's entourage, and killed. It appears to the children that wickedness has won the day and that all is lost.

As the children tearfully leave the scene it is dawn. They hear a great cracking, a deafening noise. They rush back and find the great table split in two and Aslan gone. Suddenly he appears

before them and as they shake in fear he explains to them “that though the witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she does not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the Dawn of Time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.” Brett Blair and Staff

The context here begins to approach that of our Gospel, but to even imagine loving the lion and being with him, following him, defending him, probably still escapes most of us. The first matter in this Gospel is that of Jesus' kingship.

The second matter is the weeding out the good from the bad, the sheep from the goats, those who have understood Jesus' message and followed its precepts from those who may or may not have understood his teaching. They do call him “Lord”, but they have chosen not to model their lives after his. That is the

judgment. It is a similar idea to that of teaching children that there are always consequences to one's behavior, and not wanting our children to be 25 or 30 before they realize it. This judgement is not something to be feared. We have known all along that all behavior has consequences. We may deny it, but that is simply the way it is in the world we live in and always has been. What Jesus does is simply identify the behaviors of our lives, recognize our choices and with us see the consequences.

The story is told of a young monk asking an older monk, "Father, if God is infinitely merciful, how can he deprive anyone of his heavenly kingdom?" The older monk answered, "Why do you keep turning your head from side to side?" The younger monk replied, "Because the sun keeps hitting me right in the eye and just won't leave me in peace." "Then you've answered your own question," the older monk laughed. "God doesn't deprive anyone of his heavenly kingdom. Some simply cannot bear the light, any more than you can bear the light of the sun."

This vision of the last judgment is telling us that there is a

greater standard than what we think or what we are comfortable with. Leander Keck has noted that true authority is not self-generated but stands over against us because it has its own integrity. It is a standard by which we can be judged. This speaks of an ultimate justice where that which is wrong will be made right. We will be held accountable. B. Wiley Stephens, Heaven's Audit of One's Soul

None of us want that accountability, but it must be present. There is no world physical or spiritual where such accountability can not be present or that world would have no continuity with this one. We may see an example of this as highly placed men in our society are being brought to judgement by women they have harrassed or abused. Everywhere in the universe the laws of physics and time and space and spiritual verity must follow the same patterns, in order for there to be a universe, a realm that has enough integrity to simply hold together. And though God transcends his universe, he also is coexistent with it, that is, the creation is an extension of the will of God, and not foreign to Him. In fact, in the Revelation of Jesus to John, he will ultimately make

his dwelling with humanity here in his creation. All of this is consonant with the unity of behavior and consequence.

It is, therefore, with perfect consistency that in today's Gospel Jesus says to the sheep that when I was hungry you gave me food, when I was thirsty you gave me something to drink, when I was naked you clothed me. Amazingly, those same blessed ones, said Lord when did we do all of that? And the king replies, whatever you did for the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.

A man named John Jackson, who is an advocate for the poor in Orlando, Florida, tells of an event that happened one day outside a food distribution center where he was working. Jackson describes the event: "The line was long that day, but moving quickly. And in that line, at the very end of the line, stood a young girl who appeared to be about 12 years old. She waited patiently as those at the front of that very long line received a little rice, some canned goods, maybe a couple of pieces of fruit. Slowly but surely, she was getting closer to the front of the line, closer to the food.

From time to time she would glance across the street. She didn't notice the growing concern on the faces of the people who were distributing the food. There wasn't going to be enough. The food was rapidly running out. Their anxiety began to show, but still the girl didn't notice. Her attention seemed always to focus on three figures huddled together under a tree across the street. At last she stepped forward to get her food. But the only thing left was one lonely banana. The workers were almost ashamed to tell her that was all that was left. But she didn't seem to mind. In fact she seemed genuinely happy to get that solitary banana. Quietly she took the precious gift and ran across the street where three small children waited. Maybe they were her siblings, maybe not. Very deliberately the girl peeled the banana. Then she carefully divided the banana into three equal parts and placed the precious food in the eager hands of those three young ones. 'One for you, and one for you, and one for you!' Then, for her own meal, she licked the inside of that banana peel." Jackson concludes the story, "And I will always believe that I saw the face of God that day."

In a world where "religious" people, claiming to speak for God, often appear to know so much, to have such clear and firm ideas about exactly what's right and exactly what's wrong, who's going to Heaven and who's going to Hell, isn't it refreshing to hear of those whose sole motivation for acts of loving kindness is compassion? And isn't it refreshing to meet those righteous sheep who are genuinely baffled by the words of Jesus that, in their loving acts of kindness, they were really serving Jesus himself?

Johnny Dean, Sermons.com, staff

The other side of the coin is as necessary in spiritual reality as is the other side of any coin in physical reality. To those found to be outside the blessings of the king, the same rule is applied, for when I was hungry, you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” They they will object and say Lord, when did this occur? And he will answer them Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these you did not

do it to me.

The famous evangelist Billy Sunday was once asked, "What must I do to go to hell?" Sunday answered, "Nothing." That's the message of Matthew 25 also. If we want to have hell on earth and hell for eternity, then we will look the other way.

Miroslav Volf was a theologian teaching at Yale University. He is Croatian by birth and began his teaching career in his native country, the former Yugoslavia, while the wars raged around him. He is a theologian who believes deeply in the cross of the crucified Christ and believes that forgiveness from such a cross must in some way inform the way we live our lives. At the beginning of his book about embracing the enemy [Exclusion and Embrace: Abingdon, 1996] he recounts a story about giving one of his lectures that would become his book: "After I finished my lecture, Jurgen Moltmann [a world-renowned professor of theology] stood up and asked one of his typical questions, both concrete and penetrating: 'But can you embrace a cetnik?' It was the winter of 1993. For months now the notorious Serbian fighters

called ‘cetnik’ had been sowing desolation in my native country, herding people into concentration camps, raping women, burning down churches, and destroying cities. I had just argued that we ought to embrace our enemies as God has embraced us in Christ. Can I embrace a cetnik—the ultimate other, so to speak, the evil other? What would justify such an embrace? Where would I draw the strength for it? What would it do to my identity as a human being and as a Croat? It took me a while to answer, though I immediately knew what I wanted to say. ‘No, I cannot—but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to.’ ” [p. 9.] James R. Gorman, *The Will to Embrace*. How about our embracing an Isis fighter or someone who has killed our child? In this business of being Christian we are not going to find our answers in the world around us . We will only find them to the extent that we seek them to the extent that we seek them in Jesus of Nazareth. *So be it.*