



The Church of England
in Essex and East London

Diocese of Chelmsford

Sermon

Making Sense of Judgement

Sunday 17th September 2017 Proper 19 Matthew 18vv21-35

If we are honest, most of us do not like grey areas. We prefer the certainty of black and white, because grey areas can speak of 'fudge', or compromise not giving us the certainty of an answer for which, most of the time, human life craves. And for all our talk of a just, confident, non-judgemental society, one that boasts equality of opportunity and beliefs, I believe we are living more of a black and white existence than ever. One can see it spiritually in the global rise of fundamentalism, economically in the ever widening gap between rich and poor amidst the rampant march of consumerism and human exploitation, and politically as various minority groups, factions and nation states seek to establish their sovereignty and ethnicity, to violently affirm their right to exist and the belief in the superiority of their culture and religion over against their neighbours.

The problem is though, the Bible is not a grey book; on the whole it is solidly black and white. Many prophets were women and men whose message was culturally conditioned. Deeply hurt by Israel's continuing humiliation at the hands of its neighbours and enemies; shocked by the casual attitude to their covenant relationship with God by their own people, they often look forward to a clearing away of the grey, and their message is often preoccupied with the re-establishment of right and wrong and the identity of the virtuous and the wicked - a vision that is couched in terms of a judgement meted out by God to the deserving in both camps - the black and the white. For example Malachi says: "Then once more you shall distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him".

Such an image of judgement, black as night and white as snow in its division of the sheep and the goats, is probably the one that most readily comes to our minds - but nonetheless it is absolutely central to the Biblical tradition.

And on the face of it, our reading from St. Matthew's Gospel today does nothing to dissuade us of these impressions. The Gospel begins with an image of and a requirement for forgiveness given to Peter with which we are familiar and with which, to be honest, we are comfortable, because that is what we most easily associate as a chief characteristic of our Christian faith. It ends with a story which should send a shiver up and down our spines, as the servant who couldn't forgive his colleague for owing him a paltry debt, despite being forgiven himself for owing his master a much larger one, is thrown into prison and subjected to torture until his debt was paid- to the last penny.

Jesus is unequivocal about judgement and pulls no punches when he describes what will be when the unrepentant and the unforgiving fall under God's gaze. So the question is how are we to make sense of the concept of judgement and to embrace it as part of our Christian inheritance, rather than running away from it and burying our heads in the sand as so many of us are wont to do with this difficult, uncomfortable subject? For its easy to see Christ's open arms as an embrace from the cross, but its not so easy to grasp that the cross also has an end time dimension to it, when those who cannot or will not repent will experience God's judgement because they have resisted to the very end the powerful lure of the open arms of the crucified Messiah.

The problem is that 'judgement' is also a word of law, and its legal meaning has often slipped into the theological context with the image of God the Judge weighing our faith

and actions in the balance. Such a view has caused a too easy division too often between the believer and the unbeliever, the saved and the lost, that has characterised much Christian thinking. It has also had a catastrophic effect on faith, and I believe goes a long way to explain why the faith of so many has failed to grow and mature - that is - a commitment to God which is based on the hope of reward, or because we are hopelessly afraid of the personal wrath of a God who is so fickle and capricious that he will put the eternal boot in to punish some of the sinful and to forgive others, and never being sure into which category we fall. I've lost count of the number of people I've come across who blame God for some calamity that has happened in their lives, and who have subsequently voted with their feet. Whilst it is perfectly natural and human to ask the question 'why?', I can't help feeling that for many, behind the demand for an answer is some kind of infantile, childlike perception of a judgemental God who should have been beneficent because, "I've always come to Church vicar", but instead has meted out some kind of underserved 'punishment'. "What have I done to deserve this?" is a plaintive cry often heard.

But you see, the very fact that the Bible in general and Jesus in particular talks about judgement, is not because God wants to punish or reward people, but because he *loves* them. To judge the world, God has to intervene in it and become part of it; to believe in the concept of a judgement is also to believe in the concept of a resurrection, because it is a belief that things do not need to stay as they are; that transformation, transfiguration, is possible.

And that is the tinge that colours Jesus' use of the concept of God's judgement. Jesus' prophetic, apocalyptic vision of the end things, an example of which we are given in today's Gospel, is inseparable from a passionate concern for the poor and the outcast. In the midst of so much that is apparently black and white in its assertion of who is sinless and who isn't, of who is going to heaven and who isn't, we need to be reminded that underpinning all our behaviour which will ensure our salvation is the message which we have heard from the beginning: Christ's primary command to love one another - a command that demands and requires not just service but forgiveness from one to the other, and an acceptance of that totality which is the other.

For the Pharisees, the situation was black and white; the poor, the prostitutes, the prisoners and the unclean had no place in the kingdom of the elite. For Jesus, the only thing black and white about that was that their lowly status **assured** their position at the table in God's kingdom. And for us who are so often made poor and outcast by the weakness of our faith and the dullness of our sight, the finger of God comes upon us to summon us into an awareness of our true nature - to the fact that the separation between sheep and goats is **not** black and white, but is something which goes right down the middle of us; that the deeper insight we obtain into the nature of God's love, the more we become aware of all that there is about us that is less than it might be. That we stand on his right hand as God works his will through us, but we stand on his left as we side step the Gospel.

Surely a sense of judgement comes upon any woman or man of faith throughout her or his life because it is one of the basic marks of having been in the vicinity of God, and having

had the tremendous possibility of being changed by him; and if there *is* an urgency to make a positive decision to love God and neighbour, and to forgive not seven times but seventy times seven which might be thought to stem from the prospect of a 'Great Assize' at the end of time, then it is an urgency generated by the awareness that we are **loved**, and that every hair on our heads has been counted. And the glorious thing about judgement is that it stems from that love, of and for one another, which is at the heart of the Gospel and at the heart of the Universe; and it is that love upon which we stake our lives.

Ivor Moody.