

6 July 2013

He Will Come to Judge the Living and the Dead (2 Cor. 5.1-10)

Emmanuel Series IV

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When I was in primary school – maybe I was 9 or 10 – a new church took over the building next door and began to offer Scripture classes after school. It was, as I remember, an Assemblies of God church and being a religiously inclined soul, I was happy to go along. One day, we were given a lesson on the final judgement – depicted on the blackboard as a bottomless chasm with a very narrow bridge across it (representing, I assume, the passage from death to eternal life). The general idea being that narrow the way that leads to life, and if you fell off the bridge, then you'd fall down into the bottomless pit for all eternity. I don't remember being particularly appalled at this, but when I told Mum what we'd learnt that afternoon she forbade me from going back to Scripture classes there!

Well, not everyone has been rescued by their mother from such pernicious fear-mongering – and indeed, the doctrine of final judgement, the notion that at some point Christ 'will come in glory to judge the living and the dead', together with its oft-associated pictures of the souls of the damned forever in torment (think Hieronymous Bosch) has been one of the most powerful means of ecclesial power abuse and social control in the Christian world. Richard Rohr calls Christianity the single biggest producer of atheism in the West, and (at least in my experience of talking to non-Christian friends) the doctrine of the final judgement, the very possibility of being consigned to eternal damnation, tops the chart of reasons for unbelief. Who would want to worship a God like that? Who could take seriously such tyranny, such pettiness?

Given this kind of starting point, it is natural for Christian apologetics to focus on the question of the *kind* of judgement that is promised. Is there even such a 'place' as hell? Even if 'hell' has to remain a conceptual possibility (because of the depths of human depravity), is it in fact empty because God's love actually manages to redeem everyone? And so on and so forth.

But before we get to these questions, it's worth pondering the strangeness of the very fact that judgement is promised at all. Because not all cultures, not all religious traditions have this notion of time running towards judgement, of the created order having purpose and direction, and of our lives being accountable for their relationship to that purpose. The scholars say that it is a feature of the Hebrew tradition not shared, for example, by Greek culture which saw time as cyclical, a timeless cycle of eternal return, rather than linear and teleological. And for many in our culture, in an infinitely expanding universe, the notion that one day the 'end' might come, that Christ will return and we'll all be lined up like sheep and goats to 'receive recompense for what has been done in the body, whether good or evil', seems to belong to the world of loony apocalyptic sects or an overly tidy moral imagination. In our post-modern, post-Christendom world, people seem much more likely to believe that 'shit happens' and that the world will end not with a bang, but a whimper. The idea of justice on a cosmic scale is almost literally in-credible.

So what is it about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus which led the apostolic witnesses to proclaim the unlikely doctrine of the final judgement, and why should we take this proclamation seriously?

As ever, it helps to begin concretely with the disciples' experience of the risen Jesus. I have often spoken of this as an experience of forgiveness – and indeed it is. Jesus returns to his friends, those who have betrayed and abandoned him, and returns to them as the presence of forgiveness. He gives them his peace, he eats with them

again, and calls them once more to follow him. What they have done does not determine how he is for them, and for the world – his love is such that death itself cannot overcome it. But while encounter with the risen Christ is an experience of forgiveness and mercy, it is also an experience of judgement. In the light of Jesus' resurrection and his return as forgiveness and peace, the disciples are brought to see with painful clarity their own lack of faith and courage, their complicity with the world's violence. It is the same for Paul on the road to Damascus – Jesus is present to him as judge – as a mirror who shows him what he really doing.

True liberation and conversion, true turning from manipulative, destructive and violent ways of being only follows from seeing them for what they are – seeing their futility, and the way they deal death to ourselves and others. When Jesus returns to the disciples as their judge, this is the gift he brings them His judgement is not in the service of condemnation, but rather of healing, reconciliation and liberation. Notice then that the judgement of the risen Christ transforms our very sense of what God's judgement is – it is not the condemning and murderous punishment of our nightmares, but the forgiving judgement of our crucified victim, a judgement which remains always a kind of grace – which doesn't mean it is easy or painless to undergo. Think how hard it is really to face ourselves sometimes, really to hear the truth. Jesus' judgement is about not being left to live out our days in illusion and self-deception and the self-righteousness, being called to accept the common ground of our creatureliness and an invitation into the fullest life of which we are capable. Is it possible to refuse this gift, this invitation? If it truly is gift and invitation, then presumably it is – but I am drawn to Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar, who suggested that believing in the possibility of 'hell' is compatible with the hope that it is nevertheless empty.

So this is the judgement with which Jesus returns to his disciples. But what leads the early church to proclaim, not only that Jesus once returned in this way, but that he

will come *again* to judge the quick and the dead? I think it follows integrally from the resurrection's revelation that, in Jesus, God's own self has come among us, that Jesus is the Word of God – in Jesus the meaning of God *and* the meaning of creaturely life is fully expressed. And if this is true, then the transforming and liberating judgement of the crucified one is eternally (in the past, present and future) the measure of who we are and who we are becoming, the measure of our lives and deeds. *Whenever* we see those who are hungry, thirsty, naked and in prison, Jesus taught, we see Jesus himself in need ...

Now whether there is a 'day' of judgement is a question even within the New Testament – the concept of the 'day' belongs to the Jewish apocalyptic imagination and even by the time of John's gospel, we are seeing a shift to the understanding that in Jesus the day of judgement has already happened because the powers of death have already been overcome. Anyone who lives now 'in Christ' 'has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life' (John 5.24). But there remains a sense that the fullness of creation is yet to come – God's life made visible in Christ has not yet been fully realised in or among us. So our present world, our own lives, dwell in the space between, the time of the Spirit which is given as a guarantee of the promised fulfilment. We live (Paul says) still in an earthly tent, longing for our heavenly dwelling and groaning till we are clothed, till 'what is mortal may be swallowed up by life'. So we continue to live under judgement, and Christ the judge goes ahead of us, calling us to follow his way.

The good news is that he already knows us, all the bits we're hoping he does not see, and loves us, forgives us, in advance. How do we know that? We know it by our own experience – we know it in prayer as we dare to open our hearts to be known, and discover the judgement that reveals the truth of us not to condemn us but to enable us to own it and be liberated, reconciled to ourselves and each other. To accept Christ's

judgement and to receive fullness of life are the same thing, and it is to give us life and give it in abundance that Jesus came among us. This is something the disciples came to know in their redeeming encounter with their risen friend – and it remains the gift of his judgement for us.