



BENEDICTUS
contemplative church

27 November 2017

The Last Judgement (Matthew 25: 31-46)

“Life is a Cabaret, old chum—come to the Cabaret”:
Re-interpreting, Reclaiming and Rejoicing in God’s Judgement

A Series of three Sermons for Benedictus Contemplative Church

2. Judgement of the Nations:

Christ the King, Year A, 6.00pm Saturday 25 November 2017
(this 2nd sermon also at All Saints’ Anglican Church, Ainslie, Sunday 26 November)

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell
+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

This gospel reading about God’s final judgement on the nations of the world shows that there’s more at stake than just our own individual wrongdoing. God’s judgement isn’t primarily an individual reckoning for each of us. Rather, it’s a revealing of how each of us is located in the larger movements of culture and history. God’s judgement shows how we stand vis-a-vis the whole way of the world—with business as usual as it plays out in nation after nation—all of which is revealed as contrary to God’s loving, self-giving solidarity with our world.

In this gospel reading all the nations—*panta ta ethné* in the Greek—are gathered together. And they’re all found to be pretty much indistinguishable under Jesus’ eye, with their pride and pretensions, their claims for god-like transcendence, shown up by the real transcendence of Christ the King, who we see glorified with all his angels. It’s the risen Lord and not the nations who reveals where real power and glory lie, in his sovereign preference for the powerless, the victimised and all whom the nations typically hold in contempt. I refer of course to those he names: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the imprisoned. In our terms, the sick, the poor, the immigrant, the prisoner. We typically

define greatness in contemptuous opposition to the victims of this world. But it's among such as these that Jesus takes his stand, finds his friends, and reveals the game-changing glory of his resurrection. Thus he turns the tables on the false transcendence that so many typically run after. Instead, this gospel of God's judgement invites us to share with Jesus in what James Alison calls the intelligence of the victim.

From this alternative perspective, a new and decisive human division emerges, out of so much sameness among the nations. We're offered a new way of measuring success, beyond the size of an empire, the wealth of a nation, or the growth rate of an economy. We're shown that some are of more use to God's dream for humanity, to God's reign, to God's Kingdom, and some of less use. There are those with the intelligence of the victim, and there are those who still adhere to the victim-making mindset. The former are more useful to God, as sheep are more valuable than goats, even though they typically live and mix together in the one flock.

A couple of chapters back, in Matthew 23, Jesus names and confronts the victim-making religion of the Pharisees and Sadducees, who want to add him to the list of God's anointed whistle-blowers who were sacrificed in past times to maintain the status quo. Then, in Matthew 24, Jesus distances himself from the religion of Jerusalem's sacrificial temple, which he sees himself bringing to an end. Jesus' pending passion and death is a confrontation with that sort of religion, which requires blood sacrifice to maintain the status quo, in favour of a new stage in human religiousness built on solidarity with the victims.

Even our modern world is implicated, despite so much progress in human rights, human health and human prosperity. For all that, we modern Westerners like to outsource our responsibility for others to the free market and to state bureaucracies. We're a culture in which social and community ties are essentially voluntary. We've preferred the rational utilitarianism of impersonal commercial exchange, and we favour efficient professional service delivery—not only because these are cheaper but because they help us keep other people's problems at arm's length.

Yet aren't we seeing a reaction against all this, towards reconnection with the environment, with our localities, with community and even with spirituality? And all this despite the fact that such impulses are being energetically taken over and commercialised by social media?

Indeed, in mainstream political and economic circles, we're seeing signs that neo-liberalism—which worships the transcendent lordship of the free market—is losing some of its lustre. There's a venerable European counter-movement called Civil Economy that's being recovered—associated with an English movement known either as Blue Labour or Red Tory. Civil economy seeks to return virtue to the public realm of markets and finance, rather than limiting virtue to the private realm of personal choices. The intention is to help isolated modern consumers recover some social and environmental belonging, and for this to be seen as normal, rather than weird or perverse.

Imagine it: a world more like a well-functioning NDIS, and less like an abortion clinic, or a euthanasia death pact. Imagine it: an immigration or a youth detention policy that doesn't keep the stranger at arms length, as if they're a contagion, but takes the risk of friendship and relationship. When Immigration Minister Peter Dutton told the New Zealanders last week that their offer of \$3M worth of interim relief funding for the remnant on Manus Island could be money better spent, I was reminded of how impersonal, dismissive, disconnected and even contemptuous today's so-called duty of care can be.

Now, comrades, I'm not up here saying that come the revolution, God's going to put everyone who thinks like that up against the wall. This is the God of Jesus Christ, after all, who took his place among the victims for their sakes, as an agent of their liberation, and who didn't choose the path of armed struggle, with the violence that begets more violence—the so-called cycle of violence. As a result, we don't need to understand God's judgement in terms of divine violence against the ideologically unaligned. The day of judgement isn't a Stalinist purge, or a one-way ticket for *Untermenschen* to the death camp. Rather, God's judgement is a reminder of our share in Jesus' resurrection victory over sin and evil, over violence, over the universal spirit of "you're on the outer so I can be on the inner," which is the very attitude that brought Jesus to the cross. God judges that attitude not by hating and destroying those who represent it but by submitting to the worst effects

of that attitude in person, without hitting back. Then in Jesus' resurrection, God the Father can reveal and turn the tables on that whole rotten, sad yet by no means inevitable state of affairs. And it's into this judgement, this solidarity, this victory, that you and I are baptised—into a victory, as Martin Luther imaginatively put it, over sin, death, the devil, the law and the wrath of God.

Now, what of the end of our Gospel reading, with its promise of eternal punishment and eternal life? Is this good news only for some, while it's bad news for many—perhaps most? Is God's solidarity and mercy finite, so that many, perhaps most, won't find any of it left for them? Or am I right that we've misread this warning from Jesus and miss the good news that this warning holds up for all of us?

I suggest that Jesus' warning in this gospel reading reveals the choice that we're already making. This gospel of judgement helps us see if we're on the side of the victims or on the side of the victim makers. And if we are on the side of the victim makers, then we'll almost certainly expect that God's a victim-maker, too, and that's how we'll experience God. If we're bitter and contemptuous, then our God will likely be bitter and contemptuous—that's how we'll experience God, and that's what we'll expect from God. But friends, the old literature of future apocalypse isn't read literally by Jesus, and nor should we read it literally. Rather, Jesus repurposes fire and brimstone language as a way of talking about our standing with God now, our resemblance to a sheep or a goat now, so that if need be we can reach out and claim our birthright as followers of Jesus and find another way *now*.

As I draw to a close, let me offer you an illustration to make my point more clearly. I suggest that Jesus' warning in this gospel is like Ebenezer Scrooge's encounter with the third ghost, the ghost of Christmas to come, in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. This is a terrifying figure, who reveals to the bitter and contemptuous Scrooge just how loveless and disconnected he is. Scrooge is shown how his death will be greeted by those who have the misfortune of having known him: with petty opportunism, indifference and plain relief. Yet this revelation doesn't condemn Scrooge to that future of his own making. Instead, the whole point of the warning is to offer the possibility, the gift, of escaping that cursed future—none of which is inevitable.

And so Scrooge finds himself risen with Jesus Christ at the heart of a newfound loving human solidarity, with his former freely-chosen self exile forever past and gone. So, friends, our self-administered curses are not inevitable. All that is inevitable is the grace and risen glory of Christ the King, who in the meantime proves to be a necessary if unrecognized supplement for the humanizing of our whole world.

The Lord be with you ...