

## **Advent 2 2008 Judgement**

Judgement is a forbidding word. Partly so, because it conjures for us the image of the Last Judgement, Christ in majesty determining, by a powerful swish of his hand, the fate of those who stand on his right – the just welcomed into heaven – and those who stand on his left – the damned dragged into hell. But judgement is also theologically forbidding, because it means so many different things. I might well trust someone's judgement when it came to recommending a restaurant, but I will probably not ask the restaurant critic to judge the verse speaking competition or the trials for the first eleven football team, still less to issue a legal judgement, still less to decide the eternal fate of the people of God.

John the Baptist warns of a coming judgement. The account we heard from Mark's gospel is pared down, minimal in form, but in Matthew we hear him telling the scribes and Pharisees about the wrath which is to come. Judgement and wrath go together in our minds – there is something essentially frightening about the notion of being called to account. The judgement we imagine is akin to pleading a case, presenting ourselves and our lives, and waiting for the verdict to be pronounced – are we upheld, or are we condemned?

That forensic language of the law court offers us a way in to one of the most misused Biblical ideas, that of divine justice. Here the culprit is St Paul, but of course it's not St Paul himself, but those who have read him and interpreted him, who have misled us. When Paul writes of the righteousness of God - *dikaiosune theo* – the Vulgate Latin renders this as “*iustitia Dei*”, too close for comfort to the phrase “the justice of God”. But the righteousness of which Paul speaks is a description of God not first because he is the judge, the one who determines who is righteous, who is upheld by the law court, but because he first is righteous, he is faithful to his covenant promise as the God who brings life from death and salvation to all people.

Our understanding of judgement in the Bible has long laboured under the misapprehension that the Jewish religion practised by Jesus and Paul was a legalistic religion of works. The traditional reading, stemming particularly from Martin Luther, runs thus: Paul turns his back on the Jewish law because one is justified – made righteous – not by what one does, but by the grace of God. Although the second part of that statement is correct, the first part manifestly is not. To begin with, Paul does not turn his back on the law. And this is the case because the so-called legalism of Paul's Jewish faith is nothing of the sort: first century Judaism is, like later Christianity, a religion of grace. The law is

God's free gift to his people which enables them – the righteous ones of God – to live as they ought to live – righteously. The law is not what makes them righteous, what upholds them in God's sight. Rather God has chosen his people and graced them with a way of living.

Paul objects, it is true, to the rigid application of the law to new Christians, Gentile Christians. He does so because the law is not a way in – it was not a way in for Israel, but a gift which followed acceptance; likewise it is not a way in for the Gentiles, who have been accepted in Christ. Hence the Epistle to the Galatians and the polemic against the circumcision of Gentile Christians. But although this polemic states unequivocally that it is by grace through faith that we are made righteous, this being made righteous is not the justice of God guaranteeing salvation for the individual; it is the fulfilment of his promise to make possible the salvation of all. You are accepted by grace through faith: you must then live as a Christian and at your life's end be judged, and you will be judged, Paul thinks, according to what life you have led.

This is not an argument for Pelagianism, the notion that I can earn my salvation. The Christian life is only possible because of the free gift of God's grace. But it does mean that judgement is something more than

an individual moment of magic whereby I am guaranteed my place at the heavenly banquet.

If we wish to know more about the judgement of God, we ought as always to attend to the words of Jesus. And they will tell us something rather surprising. You see, there is an important sense, I suggest, in which the judgement of God is not the application of justice, at least not in any way that we might understand. On the contrary, we might suggest that God is rather unjust. Being just seems to involve being fair, and the love of God is not what we would normally mean by fair. In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the elder brother is absolutely right that the situation is unfair – the young wastrel deserves nothing of the lavish celebration which his father gives him. It is not fair. But that is the point, the love of God is not fair, it infinitely exceeds fairness. It is endlessly unfair, endlessly undeserved, it is, by our standards, quite absurd. The love of God means that the foolish, weak, proud and selfish person that I am is accepted unconditionally and forgiven without question or requirement. Do I deserve this acceptance, this judgement? Certainly not. Does it make sense? No, not really. Is it fair? Not at all.

Our ideas of judgement are all too clear from the gospels. They are the outraged self-righteousness which whines at the conversion of Zacchaeus the tax collector. They are the fearful self-preservation

which denies any knowledge of Jesus in the courtyard of his accusers. They are the fearful and brutal condemnation which sentences Jesus, the love of God personified, to the fate of torture and of death. Judgement, as we know it, takes it upon itself to judge the Son of God – the judge judged in our place, as Karl Barth memorably put it. Judgement, as we know it, snuffs out the flame of love which burns too brightly for human justice to control.

But Jesus also judges. It is Jesus who first calls to Zacchaeus, it is Jesus who touches the leper, it is Jesus who defends the woman taken in adultery. And it is Jesus who utters at the moment of his human judgement, the true judgement of God: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” That judgement, divine judgement, contradicts all the smug expectation of righteousness and reward which we are vain enough to construct. Human judgement condemns life itself to death on a cross, but life – even crucified life – utters the final judgement of all. On Good Friday and on Easter Day God offers the final judgement, the unquenchable love which judges death to be endless life. Let us pray that the life-giving love of Christ our risen Lord may be our own last judgement.