

Second Sunday of Advent 2016

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Matthew 3.1-12

But when John saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them “You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come. Bear fruit that befits repentance.” Matthew 3.7,8

This particular weekend is perhaps the strangest in the Oxford year. We are suspended momentarily between past and future judgement. Michaelmas Term has come to an end, and the annual trials of the admissions exercise are upon us. What this means, in practical terms, is that the unsung heroes of Oxford life – college staff – are tasked with turning round hundreds and hundreds of student rooms in twenty four hours, so that a seemingly endless number of interview candidates can come and fill them. The undergraduate population has been kicked out ruthlessly and unceremoniously, in order for this turnaround to take place. But last night, and this morning, whilst the exodus has taken place, the onslaught of new arrivals remains ahead of us. And, once the shops are closed, central Oxford becomes a place

eerily empty of its usual population. This emptiness lasts little more than a day. By this evening, those vacated rooms will be filling up, and the next few days will be filled with the sight of anxious sixth formers processing up from the station wearing their smart clothes and wheeling their suitcases, dragging themselves unwillingly not to school, but to the coming judgement that is the Oxford interview. Of course, these days, interviews themselves are only one part of a complex process of selection involving many different academic criteria, but it's no fun for the media to tell the truth about Oxford, and so the myth of the terrifying interview prevails.

Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? John the Baptist's statement might be directed towards the regular student population, who have obeyed instructions and scarpered before this frenetic process begins. But the judgement that is coming, wrathful or otherwise, is coming upon the poor sixth formers who have applied. Pray for them this week, for it's really not much fun for anyone.

In a time of such fear and uncertainty in our country and the world, the theme of future judgement seems a bit more real

than usual. To be sure, Christian attitudes to the future have developed over the centuries. The fear of hell and damnation is not a Christian motivation, despite centuries of preaching to the contrary. The Christian imperative to worship God and to love one's neighbour is an imperative because it is the teaching of Christ, not because failure to adhere to it will have unpleasant consequences. But the season of Advent is a season in which we reflect upon the judgement of God as we anticipate the coming of Christ, and whilst we might rejoice that our churches are no longer decorated with lurid paintings of the day of doom, warning us of the fate of those who are goats rather than sheep when the heavenly division takes place, we might also reflect that a loss of any sense of judgement or responsibility is something which can hardly be desirable from a Christian point of view.

John the Baptist is both a figure of extraordinary power and personality, and also a herald of judgement. He is a popular man, someone to whom the whole country is drawn. People were coming from everywhere, from Transjordan as well as Jerusalem - everyone, scribe and slave, rich and poor, Jew and proselyte. John's status as a prophet is displayed in part by

his clothing – the garments he wears are those of Elijah – but also by his words of woe for those who now hold sway. From Hosea, Amos and Isaiah, the great Hebrew prophets railed against those who oppressed the poor, abandoned the fatherless and widows, and stood by whilst injustice spread throughout the land. The gospel message of hope, of not just acceptance but salvation for the lowest, the poorest, the worst in the eyes of the world, is a message of judgement for those who allow these conditions to prevail. The chaff and the wheat will be separated, and only the unquenchable furnace awaits that which is not found worthy.

Now the Baptist turns to his audience. Offering baptism to the powerless, he is confronted with the sight of the men of power, the religious authorities, coming forward to join in – here is something to be possessed, a get out of jail free card which will protect us from judgement. And his response couldn't be clearer: you brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? This baptism is not a magic trick, not a badge or a sign which will cause the avenging angel to leave you alone. It is the gift of repentance, of the change of life and mind which the grace of God brings about. Instead of

imitating a nest of snakes, slithering out from the scrub when the consuming fire comes near, those in power should bear fruit that befits repentance. Dunking yourselves in water is not what it's about, John is telling the Pharisees. Repentance is something ongoing, a way of life, something which yields gradual results, something which continues until fruit is produced and harvesting can take place.

Locating judgement in the future and only in the future can frighten us but it can also insulate us. There is a danger that we use Advent to package away the possibility of repentance, judgement, responsibility. We are apt to understand these things as belonging only to the eschatological coming of Christ, to the day of judgement which, we rest assured, is still far off. By emphasising the second coming at Advent, we can protect ourselves from it because we think know, in our heart of hearts, that Christ is not coming, that the day of the Lord is not at hand, that the end of the world is not nigh, and that Advent will end with trinkets and tinsel and Turkey. What ought to wake us from sleep then becomes the lazy security which allows us to stay tucked in knowing that there is nothing worth getting out of bed for.

But what if the opposite were true? What if it were the case not that Christ is not coming, not that judgement is infinitely distant, but that we are all too late? What if Christ has come among us and is already here? What if the day of judgement is a day by God's standards, not by ours, and we have been living within it in our ignorance? Judgement is what God says it is, not what we decide. Compartmentalizing judgement separates it from the true life of God himself, which is the life of perfect love. God's judgement is his love, the judgement by which humanity is assumed and offered on the cross of Golgatha, the sacrifice in which we share each time we celebrate the eucharist.

We may think that damning from a distance is the right way to relate to the world, but the one who created that world will not conform to our limitations. Advent is the season of coming judgement precisely because judgement has come, because the coming among us of God himself is the final verdict of the love of God which was poured out for us before the foundation of the world. Judgement, our judgement, is not a moment but a lifetime, and the response to which we are called is that which John the Baptist requires. It is life, growth, tending and care

which are needed to bear fruit. Judgement is ongoing because life is ongoing, and the life of love to which each of us is called is a constant responsibility, an unending urgency for which we must always strive to be ready. And so, though our preparations will never be adequate, yet we prepare ourselves this Advent and at every other time for the coming of the one who is eternally ready to meet our judgement with his love.