

The four last things, Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell

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Advent 2:

In the readings for today we have John the Baptist in the gospel of Matthew saying to a gathered crowd, "Wake up to yourselves, you people. Examine yourselves honestly. The time is coming when you will stand before God and have to account for all the wrong things you have deliberately done. You will not be able to fake it, for God sees into the heart. Get ready, and be honestly sorry for dishonest actions. Be honestly sorry."

The Letter to the church in Rome tells the Christians there, that the teaching of the Apostles shows the way to go to get right with God, and the first reading from Isaiah speaks of one yet to be born, who will initiate a life and kingdom of peace and safety from danger. So the readings make a complete journey from the recognition of one's own guilt to the recognition of our gracious God.

If you pray Morning and Evening prayer each day, you might be tempted to think, from the psalms and appointed readings, that all is doom and gloom. That the prophets and Jesus are concerned only about our sinfulness, our unworthiness, and the reality of hell. It is not that way at all. Our Lord wants all the human race to be with Him in heaven, to take the possible separation seriously, and especially the seriousness of sin. Hell and heaven are real, but in the end it is our choice as to where we will spend eternity.

So I am going to speak today about the Four Last Things, Death Judgment, Heaven and Hell, because if we know what Jesus teaches, there is no worry, but just re-assurance. These are

the traditional themes of sermons on the Four Sundays in advent.

Death

Death is the separation of the soul from the body. We speak of death as “passing away”, for in death the soul leaves the body like a tenant quitting a house that is no longer needed. After death the body turns to dust in the grave, or ashes in the crematorium, awaiting the resurrection on the last day. When we die, we slough off this perishable body, which is already decaying in many ways. God is gracious, in that He gives us warning that we are not immortal on this earth. Our skin grows thin, our blood pressure usually rises, our hair falls out, our beauty fades. These are the signs indicating that wise persons need to assess their relationship with our heavenly Father. We will have to answer for the way we have lived. Jesus says that whatever kindnesses and love we have done to another human being, we have actually done to Him, the King of heaven.

Thus the body is left behind, and the soul passes from this life into Paradise. Jesus on the cross said that the penitent thief beside Him would be with Him in Paradise (Lk 23:42,43) The matter of an unquiet soul, not resting in peace, in the subject of another teaching. The souls of all the departed go to Paradise, awaiting judgment.

Judgement

It appears from Scripture that there are two judgments. The First or particular is when we die. In paradise we experience a taste of what lies ahead. If we are destined for heaven, then we taste the closer presence of God, closer than we have ever known on earth. Those not destined for heaven experience something far different and frightening. We have recorded examples from those who have been clinically dead for a minute or two, or even longer. They either see a place so beautiful

that they do not wish to come back to earth or they experience such darkness that they are totally afraid and change their ways when they are revived. It seems that no-one sees nothing at all.

The Last Judgment

The second judgment is the Last or General Judgment, which occurs when the earth comes to an end. All the departed come before the judgment seat of God. It is a day of rejoicing for those who love Jesus, and a day of doom for those who have rejected Him. Jesus looks at the lives of those who have rejected Him, to see whether there is any reason why they may be spared the consequences of the bad path they have chosen, so that His mercy may bring them to join Christians already in eternal life. We are told very clearly that if we have chosen Christ in this world then we are not condemned. Condemnation is really Jesus saying, very sorrowfully, "If that is your wish, to remain apart from Me, then I respect it." Personally, I have had the shivers when speaking to someone who said, "No, I don't believe that rubbish about hell; I'll take my chances when I die." A man like that believes he is so irresistible to God, that God could not possibly deny him admission to heaven.

Be Not Afraid

But, on the positive side, there are ample passages in the New Testament, showing that Jesus came into the world so that ALL people – men, women and children – might understand God's love, and be able to respond, for it is God's desire that no-one should perish, unless they deliberately choose to.

Matthew 2:22 "His name is Jesus, and He shall save His people from their sins"

Matthew 6:30 The story of the lilies of the field. We are of more value than lilies, and our Heavenly Father knows our needs and will meet them.

Matthew 7:7 About earthly fathers knowing needs of their children. How much more will our Heavenly Father provide for us.

Romans 8:1 "There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, for the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death.

Luke 6:37 Judge not, and you shall not be judged; Do not condemn and you shall not be condemned; Forgive and you shall be forgiven.

John 3:18 "Whoever believes in me (Jesus) is not condemned; but he that does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

John 5:24 "Truly, truly, I say to you, he that hears my word and believes in Him that sent me, has everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation, but has passed from death to life.

Romans 10:12 ff "For there is now no distinction between Jew and Greek (and we might add, between culture and race); the same Lord is Lord of all, and bestows his riches upon all who call upon Him. For everyone who call on the Name of the Lord will be saved."

In other words, if you confess yourself a Christian, you are justified before God at the Last Judgment, and do not come under condemnation. And that is that!

Summary:

The accompanying diagram illustrates what we know about death and judgment. Earth is the sphere at the bottom, separated from the spiritual world by the dotted line of death. All souls, both good and bad, go to Paradise for the First Judgment, where they remain in his place of waiting until the end of the world. When the earth disappears, ah souls go

before the throne of God for the Last Judgment, where they are either justified and proceed to heaven, or condemned and go to hell.

2 ADVENT

What is Hell Like?

Hell is certainly not a lake of burning sulphur, for this is a material thing, and not having material bodies, the damned would not feel anything. Jesus uses these similes to describe the indescribable. The unending pain He speaks of is not physical pain, but spiritual pain. When we go our own ways, we forfeit our true destination, which is to be in the presence of God. Heaven is God's creation, and He wants all of humanity to come eventually to that place. Hell is the state and condition of those who reject Him and His plan for good for them. We do not know what or where hell is. Some suggest that it is existence without the comfort of God; others say it is the hopelessness of existence without God, and the pain which that brings. I just do not know. Heaven and hell are not places, but conditions of the soul.

What I do know is that it is such a terrible place that the Son of God gave His life so that we might have forgiveness of sins and go to heaven.

Who Will go to Hell?

I quote from "The Catholic Religion", A Manual of Instruction for Members of the Anglican Communion, written by Father Vernon Staley..."Hell is the place and penal condition 'prepared for the devil and his angels' (Matthew 25:41). Hell was never intended for man, and he can only arrive there through a wilful, deliberate and continued rejection of God and

goodness. St. Bernard has beautifully written, "What does God hate or punish but self-will? Let self-will cease, and hell will not exist." We may hold it for a certainty that no one will be doomed to such a destiny, except those of whom our most merciful Saviour must say "They have both seen and hated both me and my Father", (John15:24) and in this attitude of soul have died and remain. Hell is the condition of those who are wilfully and finally unrepentant.

Who Will End up in Hell?

Who then, are those who are going to hell? In the words of Faber, "I have no profession of faith to make about the lost, except that God is infinitely merciful every soul, and that no one has ever been, or ever can be, lost by surprise or trapped in his ignorance; and, as to those who *may* be lost, I confidently believe that our heavenly Father threw His arms around each created soul, and looked it full in the face with bright eyes of love, in the darkness of its mortal life, and that of its own deliberate will that soul would not have Him.

...But all who depart this life in a right relationship with God, that is, loving both Him and Jesus, however imperfectly, will find heaven opened and the Father's eyes of love welcoming him. And because YOU here present love Jesus, however imperfectly, you will not be condemned, but welcomed with the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of Your Lord" And heaven? What can I say? Its all you ever hoped for.