

Hospitality Matters (Mt 25, 31-end)

Sermon at Trinity Chapel on 18 November 2012

1. Judgment it seems is a terrible thing. The announcement of judgment day in the biblical writings, Old and New Testament, is often cited by the critics of Christianity as one of the more obviously horrendous elements of this faith. It is, we are told, an idea intended to instil fear and trembling in the hearts and minds of people; it terrorises believers who are afraid that the smallest misstep might be enough to take them to eternal damnation whereas the path to heaven is notoriously narrow. This criticism is hardly unwarranted. A person who is very close to me and who grew up in a devout family told me that as a child she would wake up in the middle of the night believing the moment of Christ's second coming had arrived and fearful she would go to hell because of some small sin she had committed during the day. And it furthermore suffers no doubt that historically this fear has been exploited to underwrite the institutional structures of ecclesiastical power as it is only through the mediation of the Church that people were supposed to pass through this judgment safely.

2. But judgment is also a sign of hope. When a wanted criminal, *in extremis* a mass murderer or a war criminal, is finally found and brought before a court of law, the world anxiously watches the proceedings because even though we know that none of their evil deeds will be undone in the course of the trial, the trial itself and the eventual sentence at least indicate that you cannot forever get away with such crimes. The same is true also at the level of more normal, everyday behaviour we are confronted with ourselves. A word we like to use is responsibility but we mostly ignore, I believe, that it is derived from the word 'response'. If we accept responsibility for our own actions, and expect others to do the same, we implicitly invoke the logic of judgment: there is

someone or at least something to whom or to which we are answerable in our behaviour. Where this is not or no longer the case, something is missing in a human person; such a person, we might say, lacks conscience or ignores it: in fact, this inner voice that tells us clearly and distinctly (sometimes painfully so) that something we are about to do, or have done, is wrong is in many ways comparable to the mythical figure of the judge Jesus speaks about in his account of the last judgment. Those who have been haunted by a bad conscience will perhaps agree that this can be a scary thing, but surely a world full of people without conscience would be much scarier. In a word, that the Bible speaks of divine judgment indicates that God is not indifferent to what we do and how we live our lives. In the final count, the decisions we make in our existence, the attitudes we adopt and the behaviour we show make a difference. They matter.

3. Still, the way the judgment is depicted in the gospel, strikes us as simplistic: The Son of Man 'will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.' Life, we think, is much too complicated to allow for such an easy, black-and-white exercise of pigeonholing. Are we not faced with complex decisions where often it is hard to see what is right and what is wrong? Is it not frequently the case that only with hindsight (if at all) we know that a decision we made was wrong or that another one would have been more appropriate? It is true that in Jesus' words we are often presented with a world that does not seem to have many shades of grey, but it is also the case that the clear and simple structure of his message is a major source of its enduring strength. For many of his contemporaries, religion had become an immensely complex and complicated affair; to understand what God wanted it was necessary to consider a myriad of commandments, to weigh them up and apply them to the individual case. When Jesus cuts through this obsession with casuistry, he is not simplistic but understands that such a wall of religious and ethical legislation often serves to hide a deeply irreligious attitude.

When he reduces all the commandments to the need to love God and to love your neighbour, he not only indicates that, once you do this, you may well be free to ignore some of the more specific laws, but also that fulfilment of any particular religious observance, whether it is fasting or the attendance of religious service or the affirmation of specific teachings or doctrines are worth nothing unless they arise from, and are an expression of, our love for the other and our willingness to accept the call issuing from those in need of our help.

4. For surely the most astounding feature of Jesus' speech is the criterion the judge uses to justify his separation of the sheep and the goats. I suspect that for all our familiarity with the proverbial sheep and goats, its link with the hospitality theme our chapel services explore this term, may initially appear tenuous to many. We are so occupied with the irritating reference to divine judgment that we easily overlook the extraordinary nature of the judge's declaration. Nothing is said of abiding by the law, nothing of Jesus' own teachings let alone the creeds of his Church, nothing, in fact, of any particular beliefs. The judgment rests on an incredibly simple discernment: 'I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' And: 'I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' It is fascinating to note that not only the latter group but also the former express their surprise. 'I did nothing wrong', is of course what we usually say when confronted with a mistake we've made, but the astonishment of the sheep in our text may well alert us to the possibility that from God's perspective love, friendship and hospitality appear strongest in some of those society chooses to despise and condemn

and who have therefore come to think of their own lives and actions as not particularly worthy or good.

5. That most of the things the churches have traditionally told us make a good Christians do not seem to have great influence on the decisions of the Son of Man does not, however, indicate that Christianity is here simply reduced to morality. It is, after all, Jesus himself to whom the 'sheep' have attended, while the 'goats' ignored him. But they all say they never met him! Elsewhere in the gospel, Jesus famously tells a man who asked for the greatest commandment, 'love God' and 'love your neighbour'. One could be forgiven for thinking this was only the second best answer: after all Jesus was supposed to tell him the one most important rule, and it seems he couldn't quite decide so gave him the top two. Well, the story of the last judgment makes it clear that Jesus meant that the double command to love really is a single one: we love God by attending to the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner: 'just as you did to the least of these my brothers, you did to me.' This is the radical consequence of the appearance of God in our midst, as a marginal Jew of the first century; the narrative is a pointer to make us perceive God where we least expect him. Not in the places of power and influence, not with the clever, the virtuous, and the pious, but among the least of human beings. This is new, unexpected and counterintuitive, not only two thousand years ago but equally so today and, if we are to believe the words of Jesus, it will be the same at the very end of history.

6. It would, then, be facile to dismiss the language of judgment from the gospel, as we now often prefer to do. Texts like the one we have heard today tell us that our lives and our choices matter to God. They also serve as a much needed reminder of the radical nature of the turn to the other mandated by the gospel. But we must look beyond this

text and at the Bible in its entirety to note that, nevertheless, something crucial is missing from the picture it offers us. Could we, could any of us read this and not think we would be on the left side of the judge? How could we ever hope to find justice in such a trial giving the messiness of our lives? The words strangely missing from the narrative are forgiveness and mercy. It's good to know that they are present in many other places in Scripture, and while this certainty should not reduce our sense of responsibility for our lives, our attitudes and our actions, they inspire the kind of faith that protects us from the fear and dread that can so easily result from Christ's words about God's judgment when taken in isolation.