

The Judgement of God

A sermon preached by Father Michael Harper in St Botolph's Orthodox Church in London on 6th March 2005

This Sunday is called "Judgement Sunday", and we need to see its link with the following Sunday which is called "Forgiveness Sunday". Judgement without forgiveness is hell. Judgement with forgiveness is heaven.

The prayers at Vespers and Matins are full of references to – terror, open books, fearful angels, rivers of fire and trembling. But as Father Lev Gillet points out – there is another aspect to all this. At Vespers the choir sings:

O my soul, the time is near at hand; make haste before it is too late, and cry aloud in faith; I have sinned O Lord, I have sinned against Thee; but I know Thy love for man, and Thy compassion, O good Shepherd.

The passage chosen for this Sunday is Matthew 25:31-46. Here we see God acting as God. He sits – the posture of majesty. He separates, the action of supreme power. He speaks, the words which have eternal importance.

In this passage we see two comparatively rare, but deeply moving descriptions of God and man:

1 The True God identifies with the people He has created, especially with the needy – the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the victimised. He becomes part of their life, so much so that people when they bless these people are blessing God. The late Bishop David Sheppard wrote a book with the title *Bias to the Poor*. Although God has no biases, He clearly has a commitment to the poor and disadvantaged.

2 The righteous person, when told this, is totally ignorant of the fact that in doing good to these, he has done it to God.

To do good to these is to do good to God; but the opposite is also true, to ignore or neglect these needy people is to ignore God.

Let us ask an important question – how and where can a person find God? The most obvious and immediate answer is – to go to Church – or to read the Bible, or to pray to God. But according to this passage there is another answer – go and find the needy people – the poor, the disadvantaged, the aliens and the homeless. When you do good to them you will find God, for God is with them.

I was brought up to believe that the true Gospel is to believe in Jesus Christ, to trust in His salvation and to come to the Cross. But at the time we also heard of others whom we called “Social gossellers” who believed that the true gospel is about poverty and human social and material need. Matthew 25 was their favourite passage.

But there are not two Gospels – the two are vitally linked, just as the two commandments are linked, to love God and to love one’s neighbour.

To love our neighbour is to love God, and to love God means we also love our neighbour. One can’t do one without the other.

St John in his first Epistle writes, “those who say they love God and hate their brothers and sisters are liars – if you do not love those whom you have seen, how can you love God whom you have not seen?”

True Christianity has always linked the two:

- In the 18th and 19th centuries many evangelicals formed the Clapham Sect, men like Lord Shaftesbury and William Wilberforce. They took political action to secure human rights for the poor and for slaves.
- The famous Red Cross organisation has brought the sign of the Cross to many tragic human situations.
- The British Labour Party was originally formed by Christians, who believed in the need to take political action for justice and human rights.

Dr Mangala Frost said in her talk during the course called “The Way”:

Christianity has done an enormous amount of good in this world. It is the world’s largest non-governmental organisation devoted to humanitarian purposes. According to the World Health Organisation, the Christian Church is the world’s largest provider of health care, reaching into almost every village on earth.

Finally, let us see that there is, for just people, a positive side to the Judgement of God. We can all look forward to the fullest revelation of divine justice in the Day of Judgement, with the putting right of human injustices and crimes against humanity. We could mention the Armenian Massacre, with this year being its 90th anniversary, the Russian Gulag, the Jewish Holocaust, and more recently the Rwanda genocide, which was highlighted at the recent American Oscars ceremony in Los Angeles with the film “Rwanda Hotel”.

But we must also as individuals bow positively to the Judgement of God. In Lent we should examine ourselves, forgive others, and get rid of grudges. Let us look not only where we have not loved God with all our heart and soul and mind, but also where we have not loved our neighbour as ourselves.