

9. He will come to judge the living and the dead

Series: I Believe - The Apostle's Creed

Date: 4 December 2022, 2nd Sunday in Advent

Location: St George's, Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 98; 2 Peter 3:1-13; John 5:16-30

The Father judges no one but has entrusted all judgement to the Son, that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. John 5.22-23

Meaning

In his book *Reappearing Church*, Australian pastor and social commentator Mark Sayers writes that Western culture is drowning in freedoms but thirsting for meaning. He argues that Western culture has 3 systems or tanks that all need to be full in order for our society to flourish, namely freedom, meaning and relationship. Sayers suggests that our freedom tank is full to overflowing, but our meaning and our relationship tanks are running dry and so we're in decline. Both the left and the right seek to expand personal freedom as the solution to the human condition. The right does this through the free market and capitalism. The left does this through deconstructing what are seen as the oppressive structures of Western society inherited from the past. Digital capitalism and deconstruction both push freedom but combine to produce increasing isolation and meaninglessness. Buying more stuff and tearing down everything from the past don't fill the meaning and relationship tanks. We actually need to give up some freedom to gain meaning and relationship.¹

Jesus has come to set us free from our greatest oppressors - sin and death. Paul writes in Galatians "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free."² That is what his cross accomplishes and the Holy Spirit makes effective in our lives. Last week we looked at how the Church is God's gift to meet our deep need for community. The Church is how God fills up the relationship tank. Today we're going to look at the meaning question, but, I will admit, from a somewhat strange angle.

We've been working our way through the Apostles' Creed and today we come to the phrase, "from there (that is the right hand of the Father) Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead". The Nicene Creed has a similar phrase - "he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end." This is the day of judgement. Notice the two key points that the creed highlights. First, that Christ will come again. And second that he will judge all people who have ever lived.

In 2 Corinthians 5 we read that,

We must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.³

¹ Mark Sayers, *Reappearing Church*, Moody, 2019: 64-69

² Galatians 5.1

³ 2 Corinthians 5.10

All of us will have to give an account of how we've lived to the one who sees all things, who knows all things, even the secret thoughts of our hearts, and whose judgement is utterly fair, utterly just, unlike the imperfect justice we get in human courts.

We may be tempted to think that the day of judgement is an outmoded or non essential element of Christianity. The problem is that it crops up all over the Bible, Old and New Testaments, and especially from Jesus' own lips. In Matthew Jesus speaks about separating the sheep from the goats, and to those who did not feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoner, he will send to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.⁴ It's not a teaching we can avoid. Yet it is one that we don't like. A common objection is that the day of judgement is used to frighten people into obedience, to keep people under religious control. I wonder whether this is just a cover for the fact that most of us don't like the idea that we might be ultimately accountable for our lives to someone other than ourselves. And what's more that we might be judged and found wanting. I want to make the case that the fact that Christ will one day judge all people is actually good news, both that he will judge and that it is Christ who will judge. In fact this truth is vital to our lives. You can tell me if you're convinced.

Why is it good news that Christ will judge? Two reasons: First, because his judgement gives meaning to our lives. Second, because his judgement will bring ultimate justice.

We began with the crisis of meaning in the West. Our meaning tank is empty. That means we're lost, aimless, bored and depressed. In his novel *The Trial*, Franz Kafka, illustrates our problem. K, an office worker is one day visited by police and told that he has been charged with a crime, but he is not told what it is. He spends the rest of the novel wading through endless layers of bureaucracy trying to find out what he has been charged with, trying to see how his case is progressing, and when his trial will be. Nothing makes sense in the novel. Time and space don't function normally. Life is absurd, meaningless. The novel ends with K asking "Where was the Judge whom he had never seen?" Kafka's point is that without a judge to give a definitive verdict on our lives, life is meaningless.

We live in a post truth age of fake news, where truth and falsehood, right and wrong, are up for grabs. There is no external reality to which we all refer and to which we all belong. There is only power, and so everything is a contest. In his trial Jesus says to Pilate, "everyone who is on the side of truth listens to me", to which Pilate replies, "What is truth?"⁵ We live in Pilate's world. But one day Jesus is coming back. Every eye shall see him in his glory. And he will declare his judgement. Peter writes, "the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare."⁶ That is to say, his judgement will be the disclosure of the truth. Things will be seen for what they really are. We will be seen for who we are.

This means that our lives and our actions have meaning. What we do and who we are matters. We are not just a random collection of atoms that will one day dissolve. We can do good. We can make a

⁴ Matthew 25.31-46

⁵ John 18.37-38

⁶ 2 Peter 3.9

difference. We can be people who reflect God's light and life, even in small and seemingly insignificant ways that no one else sees. Every secret moral struggle. Every small victory. Every shuffle of perseverance. It matters.

What's more that Christ will judge means that the judgement of others is not something that you or I need to worry about. And I need to recognise my own judgement are not the last word. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 4,

I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes.⁷

Isn't that magnificent. What confidence. What humility. Because Christ will come and judge.

Justice

The second reason that Christ's coming to judge is a good thing is because it will be a day of justice. It will be a day where all things are put right. This is what we remember and look forward to in those great Christmas texts from Isaiah.

For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.

He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and for ever.⁸

All too often in this life, justice is something the rich and powerful can buy, and something the poor and weak are robbed of. Where is the justice for the child labourer, the migrant sold into sexual slavery, the factory world killed in a fire in Bangladesh? The truth is when no one hears their cries, God does. That Christ will judge means that there will be justice, true justice. And for those who in this life are denied justice that is very good news.

That Christ will judge also means that we can follow the example of our saviour and love even our enemies. We leave justice to him. And so we read in Romans 12.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 4:3-5

⁸ Isaiah 9.6-7

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. **18** If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. **19** Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. **20** On the contrary:

'If your enemy is hungry, feed him;

if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.'

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The day of judgement is even good news even for creation. This world is bound under a curse due to humanities sin. But the day Christ returns will be the day he brings justice for creation. It will be liberated from its bondage to decay, we read in Romans.⁹ I take it that this is why, in texts like Psalm 98, we are invited to join with creation in singing praises to God because he will come in the person of Christ to judge.

Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.

8 Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;

9 let them sing before the Lord,
for he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity.

Decision

That Christ will return and judge is good news because it gives meaning and purpose to our lives. It's good news because it means there will be justice. But that still leaves us with a question. Is it good news for me? Or, put another way, which side will I be on when Christ judges? More to the point, *whose* side will I be on? In Revelation, the day of judgement is pictured as Christ reading from two books.

12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. **13** The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. **14** Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. **15** Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire.¹⁰

There is the book of deeds and the book of life. Yes, our deeds are judged. There final meaning is disclosed. But the final verdict is this: is your name written in the book of life?

⁹ Romans 8.21

¹⁰ Revelation 20.11-15

Jesus speaks of the same thing in our Gospel reading from John 5.

...just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. **22** Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgement to the Son, **23** that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him.

24 'Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life.

Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice **29** and come out – those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.

How are we to read texts like these alongside that other great truth, that Christ has died for the forgiveness of our sins? Which is it? Faith in Christ's death or our own works? The picture of the two books and Jesus' own words holds the two together. The question is do you honour the Son? Do you believe his word and that the Father sent him? Well, Jesus says, you have crossed over from death to life. He has died for your sins. Is that a one off thing that you can leave behind? By no means. Christ's forgiveness is something we live out of every day. His love and grace to us transforms us so that we respond to him in faith and obedience. We reflect his love in our lives. As Peter says, "you ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming."¹¹ That's the call to each of us.

In the end, it does come down to a decision. And here I want to speak to those of you with us who are exploring faith and have not yet made a decision. I would not be doing my job if I didn't. Christ will come and judge. You will have to stand before him. He will read from that book of deeds, and I can tell you as I know myself, you will stand guilty. But he is also the judge who has been judged in your place. He suffered and died for you, bearing your guilt, that you might receive his forgiveness and life. The question is will you honour him as the Judge, as your Judge? Will you hear his word and believe? Will receive his verdict on your life that you stand guilty, and ask for his forgiveness that he will give fully and freely? Peter says that God is patient with you. Christ has not returned because God does not want you to perish, but for you to come to repentance. That simply means he wants you to come to him, to come home, to honour his Son. Do that today and you will cross over from death to life. And that day when Christ returns to judge will be the best day for you as it is for the world.

¹¹ 2 Peter 3:11-12