

Christ Church, Georgetown
Sermon, Sunday, November 27, 2016, Advent 1
The Rev. Timothy Cole

I hope you all had a wonderful Thanksgiving. The Cole family's first Thanksgiving in America was just lovely and we were most delightfully looked after by some good new friends. I am not sure I quite understood it before coming here - it seemed to me to be a feast without a very clear reason - but I think I get it now. From the Pilgrims, through every historical crisis, it has become about thankfulness itself. We even watched some of the football in the evening so the enculturation process is definitely going ahead apace! Although I did have to stop myself from coming smartly to attention and singing God save the Queen when I heard those familiar chords on the organ at the offertory hymn 'God save our native land' on Thursday!!!

Some words, we notice, come to have somewhat loaded and negative meanings in common parlance. To be discriminating for instance, immediately conjures up images of unfairness or negative bias. In fact, of course, to be discriminating, in its main and original sense, means rather to have fine taste or good judgement. To discriminate between that which is good and bad, right and wrong and to promote the former and reject the later.

The related idea of Judgment also has mixed reviews.

There is Judgment, as in 'having good judgment', but there is perhaps more commonly the negative 'Judgmental' which we say of people who are excessively critical or who are unjustly disapproving of others.

As we enter the great season of Advent we are brought to reflect on what are often referred to as 'The Four Last Things; Death, Judgement, Heaven and Hell and at least three of those words present us with some real if very necessary challenges. This morning I want to think a little about the second one of those, 'Judgement'.

I suppose all of us realize that being held to account for our actions is not an unreasonable idea. We live with it every day in our lives. Exam results reveal to us how much or how little we have studied. Annual reports show us how effective we are in our working life. The state of our relationships are witness to our ability to act lovingly and rightly or not.

The idea of a Last Judgment, a final accounting for our lives and ourselves before Christ, may not be something we wish to contemplate too often but we can't avoid the reality of it if we give any credence to the words of Scripture including those of Christ himself. This morning's Gospel is only one of the clear descriptions he gives about it. The parable of the 'Wheat and the Tares' in Matthew 13 and that of the 'Sheep and the Goats' in Matthew 25, are very clear also.

And yet, this judgment comes in a context and the church has not always got it's preaching on this right.

Geoffrey Studdert Kennedy was the First World War British Army Chaplain I have mentioned to some of you because I am privileged to own one of the stoles he used in the trenches in WW1. He was probably the great British Christian WW1 poet and he wrote a number of excellent and moving poems about his experiences in that particular Hell that so many inhabited for so long.

He wrote one on this very subject of the Last Judgement called simply 'Well?' With a question mark.

He tells it from a soldier's point of view and we Padre's don't come out of it well!! It starts -

"Our Padre were a solemn bloke,
We called 'im dismal Jim.
It fairly gave ye t' bloomin' creeps,
To sit and 'ark at 'im,
When he were on wi' Judgment Day,
Abaht that great white Throne,
And 'ow each chap would 'ave to stand,
And answer on 'is own.
And if 'e tried to chance 'is arm,
And 'ide a single sin,
There'd be the angel Gabriel,
Wi' books to do 'im in."

In my experience, this bleak view is not uncommon in the Christian understanding. I remember as a small boy I used to get a lift to school from a very nice Scottish Presbyterian family and I remember their young son, Kenneth, he was my age, about 8 years old at the time had a very clear understanding of Judgement. 'God, he said, has a big black book and he writes down all the good things you do on one side and all the bad things you do on the other and if, at the end of your life, the bad list is longer than the other, then you go to hell. If the good list is longer then you go to heaven. Not being the best behaved of children this troubled me but I remembered a phrase my father had used when I first raised this concern with him and I used it one day with no great understanding of its meaning and to the considerable surprise of Kenneth's very nice father who was driving at the time. 'That's theologically unsound' I said. Poor Mr. Nicholson had a job to keep the car on the road!

And of course it is unsound. None of us would get into heaven on that basis. Not one.

Studdert Kennedy has his soldier have a dream. In it, he finds himself standing by a great sea.

I seemed to stand alone, beside
A solemn kind o' sea.
Its waves they got in my inside,
And touched my memory.
And day by day, and year by year,
My life came back to me.
I saw just what I were, and what
I'd had the charnce to be.
And all the good I might 'a' done,
An' hadn't stopped to do.
I see I'd made an 'ash of it,
And Gawd! but it were true

He sees the figure of Christ who just stands there and looks at him and says nothing for what seems like an age. At last he says just one word.

It seemed to me as though 'Is face,
Were millions rolled in one.
It never changed yet always changed,
Like the sea beneath the sun.
'Twere all men's face yet no man's face,
And a face no man can see,
And it seemed to say in silent speech,
'Ye did 'em all to me.
'The dirty things ye did to them,
'The filth ye thought was fine,
'Ye did 'em all to me,' it said,
'For all their souls were mine.'
All eyes was in 'Is eyes, – all eyes,
My wife's and a million more.
And once I thought as those two eyes
Were the eyes of the London whore.
And they was sad, – My Gawd 'ow sad,
With tears that seemed to shine,
And quivering bright wi' the speech o' light,
They said, "Er soul was mine.'
And then at last 'E said one word,
'E just said one word 'Well?'

For Studdert Kennedy that question is the judgement. Not a pronouncement upon us or our actions but the question to us of our own truthful judgment of ourselves. The soldier's judgment, our judgment, if it is honest, is as harsh as anyone else's could be ever be.

And I said in a funny voice,
'Please can I go to 'Eil?'
And 'E stood there and looked at me,
And 'E kind o' seemed to grow,
Till 'E shone like the sun above my ead,
And then 'E answered 'No
'You can't, that 'Eil is for the blind,
'And not for those that see.
'You know that you 'ave earned it, lad,
'So you must follow me.
'Follow me on by the paths o' pain,
'Seeking what you 'ave seen,
'Until at last you can build the 'Is,
'Wi' the bricks o' the 'Might 'ave been.'

This judgement we all must face one day is not actually the judgment of God on us. It is simply our realization of the truth about ourselves.

C S Lewis who we remembered in the lectionary last week comes to the same conclusion in his well know series of Children's books about Aslan and Narnia. If you haven't read them, what ever age you are, I recommend them as a most powerful Christian allegory. J R Tolkien, who was friends with Lewis didn't like allegory. He thought it was a cheap, simplistic literary form but I suppose these few children's books that C S Lewis wrote did more for the Christian Faith in his generation than almost any other Christian writing. In the last book in the series called 'The Last Battle' the Christ figure, Aslan the lion stands before the stable door which is the gateway to his kingdom and all the creatures of the world come before him. Like Studdert Kennedy's Christ he says nothing. In fact, he doesn't even say 'Well?' each creature looks into his eyes and some are filled with love and joy and pass on through the doorway and some are filled with revulsion and hate and they turn and run into the darkness.

God does not condemn. We condemn ourselves if we choose to reject the forgiveness that is offered us.

And so as we enter this great season of Advent we do so knowing two great and most wonderful things.

First, it is not too late for us now in the time of this mortal life. Not too late to cast away the works of darkness, to wake up from our sleep and to put on the armor of light. Not too late, regardless of what we have done, be it ever so dark and foul, be it ever so dead and mean. Not too late to seek forgiveness and be forgiven - however painful that may be.

Lastly, we approach the judgment of our lives knowing that every soul is his already and that we are his already. If we reject him, it will not be because he rejects us. If we reject him it will only be because of some terrible bitter pride in us that rejects the truth and desires no forgiveness from Him or anyone.

So no big black book, no dismal padre - well I hope not anyway! - just our own awareness of what we have done and been - and our willingness to wake up and look into those eyes that see everything and yet still love us. Just our willingness to know our desperate and ultimate need of forgiveness and our preparedness to cast away the dark and bear the painful intensity of the coming light.