

Laggan and Newtonmore

Church of Scotland

Rev. Catherine Buchan

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Spirit of Justice

Psalm 98

1 Corinthians 3:10-17

1 John 2:28-3:3

We are going to talk today about God's judgement. That may sound alarming to you – it does to most people – but don't panic! Nearly always when we hear the word judgment we think of accusation and punishment, because that is what the word has come to mean in popular usage. But when we talk about the judgement of God, (and in fact we rarely do: it is a topic from which many of us would rather stay away) we should look to the Bible to see what is meant by that phrase. The judgement of God is a major theme throughout Scripture, and it is not always something negative nor to be feared, but something to be longed for and welcomed.

Jesus promised his followers three things. That their lives would not be easy. That they would never be alone. That in the end all will be well. Three important promises. I know of people who would rather he hadn't promised the first – indeed there are many who have turned away from following God because God has not made everything in their lives easy – although that was not the promise. The second promise that we will never be alone is immensely comforting, especially in light of the first! And then there is the third promise, that in the end all will be well.

In the end. But we are not at the end – not at the end of the world nor at the end of our lives, and all is not well now. Whether we are thinking of our personal circumstances and problems we have to deal with and the pains, physical and emotional we have to bear; or whether we are

thinking of the state of the nation or the state of the world, all is not well now. And so how is God going to get us from where we are now, in profound imperfection, to that state of all being well? How does God put things right?

That is where judgement comes in. When the Bible talks of judgement it is always with the meaning of putting things right, whether God is judging his own people or the world in general, the end product of judgement is to put things right. Today's court system means that we tend to think of the judgement as condemnation and punishment, because in human terms there are wrongs which cannot be put right. But in Biblical times good judges did more than condemn or punish. They worked to set things right, to restore balance and harmony and well-being. Their justice was restorative, not punitive. The final goal of God's judgement is to curtail or convert all that is evil so that good is free to run wild!

When the Old Testament prophets get pretty fierce with the people of Israel who are turning from God's way, it is because they long to see things put right and in their world-view, with, for the most part, no idea that God would intervene in Jesus, that meant talking about condemnation and punishment to seek to restrain people and call them back into making things right themselves. But even the fiercest of the prophets looks forward to God's judgement, not with the glee of the sadist, but because they want to see things made right.

"He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity" says our Psalm, looking around at what God is already doing and looking forward to God doing even more in the same marvellous vein.

Looking forward is what we do with the idea of judgement. We know that justice, restorative and good-freeing justice does not always happen in this life, and so people of faith have trusted that God can continue to set things right on the other side of death, in a final restorative judgement which will make all things as they ought to be.

This is more than saying that all that is wrong will be punished. If we think of the final judgement as restorative it means that all that can be restored will be restored. In Romans 8 Paul says that all creation is waiting on tiptoe to see this happen when God's children come into their own. Everything will be restored, as God's universe, as the arc of history, moves towards universal repentance, reconciliation, purification, universal putting wrong things right.

This means that the disease afflicting the world will be treated and healed, not just diagnosed. Everything in God's ultimate justice will be not only evaluated – weighed in the scales – it will be given a new value.

The writer to the Hebrews says, "It is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that comes the judgement." (Hebrews 9:27). This does not mean that we die and after that comes the condemnation, though nearly everyone with a casual reading tends to see it this way. What we are saying is that everyone dies and after that there is a setting right.

But what about the texts that talk of fire? For there are some. There are verses in Revelation, and if that might be said to be metaphorical, what about when Paul tells the Corinthians that each one's work in Christ will be tested as by fire, to see what survives? Too often the idea of fire has led preachers and artists to think of destruction – hence fire and brimstone. But it is far better understood as an instrument of purification. Earlier this week, when I was running an errand to Kingussie church, I came across Tony, one of the elders, using a blow torch on the benches that sit on the street at the church's gate. He was torching off the old, worn paint, stripping away what was not intrinsically good, so that the benches could be made pristine again.

This understanding of judgement as restorative is not just about life after death, of course, but changes the way that we live before death. It should make us eager to use our wealth to make others rich, and not to hoard it. It should inspire us to use what power we have to inspire others, not to advance ourselves. It liberates us to be givers, givers of ourselves as well as of our substance, so that we will end this life having given more than we have received. It encourages us to be secretive about our good deeds, rather than blow our own trumpets, because we would rather defer our reward, and because we are not thinking about reward, but about making things right. Judgement as restorative is a doctrine of hope.

And this hope can also change the way we see our trials and difficulties. Sometimes when things go wrong, people are inclined to say, "What did I do to deserve this?" Or if we are slightly more outward looking, "What did they do to deserve what has happened to them?" But if we can learn to see trials and difficulties not as punishment, but as a refining fire to strengthen and purify us, then in fact trials become our friends, not our enemies. They are still hard to cope with – they wouldn't be trials if they were not – but we have hope when we see them in a different way.

So then the trial of delay – don't you hate it when things don't happen when you think they should? – the trial of delay can be like a fire that burns away our impatience. The trials of annoyances are like flames that burn away our selfishness. The demands of unpleasant duty are like tongues of fire burning away our laziness. And the unkind deeds or words of others are like a furnace in which our character is tempered and refined until we learn to bless and not curse in response. I am sure that this is what James had in mind when in his letter he says "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy." (James 1:2) And Paul said to the Romans that it is not even worth comparing our short-term trials to the long-term glory that comes from enduring them.

If we believe in judgement, in God setting things right, then in fact, and maybe counter-intuitively, we won't live in fear. We will keep standing strong with steadfast, immovable determination, and we will keep seeking to excel in God's good work in our world. If we believe that God is moving the universe towards purification, peace and justice – despite how it sometimes seems – then we will keep seeking to be pure just and peaceable now. And that isn't always easy – in the family, in small communities, and in the wider arena of the world. But if we believe that God is pure light and goodness, we will keep moving towards the light each day in this life, and then one day, when we close our eyes for the last time, we will be able to trust ourselves to the living Light in which we will awaken, purified and beloved forever.

But until then, as we walk in the Spirit, asking God to guide and lead us day by day, always letting go of the past, always allowing ourselves to be in God's saving grace and always asking God's Spirit to come to us. When we do that, we will find that one of the things God's Spirit within us tends to do is to make us hopeful in our trials, joyful as we find that we are changing, and restless with anticipation. For the Spirit of God will not rest until all is made whole and so all is made holy, and all is made well.

Life will not be easy. We will never be alone. In the end all will be well. When you think about it, this is really all that we know and all that we need to know as we walk onwards with God.