

Sunday 5 November 2006: All Souls

Under judgement – opportunity for All Souls Day

Readings 2 Corinthians 6. 1-10; Mark 12. 28-34

Every religion contains accounts not just of God, but of what it is to be human. Christianity tells of people made in the image of God for the delight and company of God; of human creativity and moral responsibility; and of our separation from God and each other through disobedience and sin. God continues to remake that primal and enduring relationship, ultimately through Christ's sacrificial love so that St Paul is able to profess that "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus". In this process of people being made and remade, God's loving forgiveness, which includes judgement is, quite literally, crucial.

None of us can escape the daily and eternal reality that we live under judgement. The Greek, and therefore Biblical, word for judgement is *krisis*, our 'crisis'. Judgement lays things bare. It's both a moment when the chickens come home to roost *and* an opportunity to rise to the challenge not by being defensive and seeing the moment off but by accepting its truth and seeking new ways to turn the dreadful moment around.

Three very different moments of judgement from my last week.

On Monday I spent part of the day at Oxford Crown Court with a priest I know who had got himself into terrible trouble and was facing the possibility of prison. He had pleaded guilty but, as so often, it was really more complex than that. I hadn't seen him for months and was struck at how much weight he had lost, that he had aged and looked ill. As the charges were read out in court you couldn't help thinking about that "dreadful day of judgement when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed", and of the passage in John's Gospel about the things in darkness being made known in light. How embarrassing and humiliating a process for my friend. It seemed punishment enough. Fortunately the judge was that marvellous mixture of firm and humane, mixing justice with compassion in a clear sighted and eminently sensible way. He gave a three year community supervision order. With the help of others, my friend can start to put his life back together.

On Wednesday, All Saints Day, there was the funeral of one of the great Christians of Soho. It was my privilege to preside at the Eucharist, the word meaning 'thanksgiving'. Bryan Burrough was described by Peter Booke, our former MP and now Lord Brooke of Sutton Mandeville, as someone who "it was impossible to think of as ever doing a dishonourable act". Bryan was the sort of person you were always pleased to meet and who left you feeling better for having done so. He was a good man, whose whole life was animated by the presence of God in Jesus Christ. The Rector of Soho, Clare Herbert, described Bryan's spirit of gratefulness. His life witnessed to the often very simple ways in which goodness is stronger than evil and light shines in the gloom. At a friend's funeral we face our own mortality and our lives stand under judgement, but not much beats a good funeral. Bryan's was an encouragement to all of us, to live life thankfully and well.

Yesterday there was the Stop Climate Chaos rally in Trafalgar Square and an associated service here in church. In an acted parable of global warming, Liz Griffiths gave out ice cubes to the congregation so that at the end there were little puddles on the floor! In facing climate change there is an impending sense of doom and the inevitability of a judgement we have brought upon ourselves and future generations. We know the science but are finding it incredibly difficult to form a collective response which undoubtedly means change of life.

The fear that paralyses us is that it might already be too late and we will need all the spiritual energy we can draw on if we are to repair, heal and transform the world.

I think it was Socrates who said that “the unreflective life is not worth living”. That piece of universal wisdom is embodied in Christian worship. Week by week, day by day, we remember and give thanks for the gifts of creation. That very process of prayerful recollection brings moments of judgement, sometimes severe. Recollection also brings joy and gratefulness, a thanksgiving for the gifts of creation impelling us to use them rightly.

This has been the week of Halloween, All Hallows Day or All Saints Day, and All Souls Day. It’s a week that acknowledges the reality of evil and holds out the hope of what is good. This morning in church we are remembering All Souls and especially those from our own community who have died this last year. If goodness is eternal, it has to be possible that evil could be too, but by the grace of God our hope is that goodness is stronger than evil and that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

In the early church, Christians used to pray at the tombs of saints. For fairly short periods this was in part because of persecution and the fear of Christians to worship publicly but it was also because the tombs of the saints were thin places between heaven and earth, a crossing between this world and the next, where God seemed very close. It is the same sense we have with holy places and shrines like the shrine of St Edward at Westminster Abbey. Even the mortal remains of someone who lived close to God, we sense there abiding in God’s eternity and find ourselves drawn into holiness.

In the same way, the memories of those from our own community who have recently died, draw us close to God. It’s not that they were especially holy – though some were - but because in their company we face our mortality and experience a moment of divine judgement.

In the 1930’s the American Protestant Reinhold Niebuhr described the human condition as being stretched between ‘the poles of wretchedness and glory’. In this morning’s Epistle (2 Corinthians 6.1-10, St Paul holds up a marvellous and glorious vision of who we can be: “as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way....by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left....”. In the end I know it’s what I most want for myself and for you, but I can’t in all honesty say on a cold November morning that it’s me just yet. This vision holds out a marvellous hope but also provokes a crisis about my own failures.

Martin Luther, in the crisis of his own faith and of the Reformation, wrote that his hope depended on him literally hanging on to Jesus on the cross.

“And then he will speak to the Father: this little appendage must also go through. He has never kept anything and all your commands he has transgressed. But Father, he hanged himself on me. Nothing to be done! I died also for him. Let him slip through.”

Martin Luther “My Hope” (transl. by Bernhard Schunemann)

This morning we thank God for the moments of judgement and mercy, and for the loving forgiveness which makes and remakes us, pulling us into the abiding presence of God and restoring our relationships with one another and making it possible for us to attempt once again to live by the commandments of God. Jesus answered the scribe who had spoken wisely

about the centrality of the commandments of God, “You are not far from the kingdom of God”.