

## ADVENT SUNDAY

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit in state on his throne, with all the nations gathered before him. He will separate men into two groups, as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." Matt. 25:31.

Of all Christ's parables, this picture of the last judgement is perhaps the most sombre and haunting. Doomsday and eternal separation are its main themes. It tells of the hidden - the disconcerting Christ - who comes to us, incognito, in the form of his poor and needy brothers.

This parable is just about the last thing which modern man wishes to hear of - the Last Judgement. We live in a permissive age which has largely lost its sense of the reality of God. We would prefer to forget that we are accountable to the Almighty for what we do in this life - or fail to do. Moral distinctions have become blurred. Sins now appear as amiable weaknesses; and we tend to shuffle out of personal responsibility for our misdeeds, pleading that 'something came over me' or claiming that we were drunk at the time. Add to this the contagious materialism of the age whose popular philosophy is the ancient Epicurianism of 'Let us eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die', and it is no wonder that many modern people reject the idea of a last judgement as an exploded myth.

Yet if we believe in a living and righteous God, holding not only that we are responsible for what we do but also that death does not automatically settle all scores, we cannot get away from the fact that judgement is an inevitable event for each one of us.

Moreover, even a casual reading of the New Testament shows that Christ and the Apostles believed in such a judgement, declaring that even now people can, by what they do, or fail to do, affect the outcome of that judgement themselves. No creed therefore can be called truly Christian which does not affirm that we are finally accountable to our maker.

And so to the parable. 'When the Son of Man comes in his glory, he will sit in state on his throne, with all the nations gathered before him'. Clearly, the Son of Man is the carpenter from Nazareth - it is he who will be the ultimate arbiter of man's destiny. Who are those who are being judged? All the nations - that is everyone - no one is exempt. 'By what criterion are they being judged? The answer of Jesus to this question is 'The heathen have met me in my brothers, for all the needy are my brothers. Therefore on that great day, they will be judged by the compassion they have shown to the poor and afflicted in whom they have met me incognito; and if they have fulfilled the law of love, they will share in my Father's eternal kingdom.

When Jesus says, 'I tell you this, anything you did for one of my brothers here, however humble, you did for me'; he is describing as his 'brothers' not the disciples, not necessarily his followers, but all the wretched, forsaken and unloved children of

God's world. Such is Christ's solidarity with them that to show love to them is to show love to Christ himself, and to refuse to show love to them, is to refuse to show love to Christ.

The parable has been called the 'story of the great surprises'; because, on the one hand we have the surprise of the 'blessed ones who had, so to speak, stumbled into paradise, completely unaware that in helping the needy they had been meeting with Christ himself; and, on the other hand, the pained surprise of the condemned who would have acted so differently if only they had known that these poor, unloved people were in fact brothers of Christ.

What has this parable from the lips of Jesus have to say to us today? Well, surely, it sends us a clear message about the responsibility which we as Christians have to care for the sick in body and mind, to take action on behalf of all the oppressed people of the world - the homeless, the hungry and the prisoners of social deprivation. 'The church is her true self', said Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'only when she exists for the sake of others,' that is, when she becomes a caring church. If this is true, the parable is a challenge to Christian action, a summons to us to become Christ's ambassadors to the casualties whom we meet on life's road. We too, it says, will be called to account for all we have done, or failed to do, for the least of Christ's brothers in whom he himself is present.  
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