

HE WILL COME AGAIN...
(from the series: The Need for Creed)

Text: Matthew 25:31-46

2/28/2010

I.

How do you feel about the second coming of Jesus Christ? There's an old story about a Catholic Cardinal who dashed into the Pope's study and breathlessly announced, "Holy Father, I have good news and bad." The Holy Father looked up from his desk and asked for the good news first. "Our Lord has returned and he wishes to speak with you on the phone right now." The Pope was elated, but he remembered the Cardinal's mention of bad news. "What could possibly be bad news on such a day?" The Cardinal replied: "He's calling from Salt Lake City."

Talk of the second coming makes us a bit anxious. What kind of news is it?

It makes us anxious because we know many people don't believe it all. It makes no sense to them. Whatever else they are willing to believe they aren't willing to believe a final judgment. Could they be right?

It makes us anxious because some people seem to believe it a bit too much. When it comes to talking about Christianity it seems the only conversation that matters is about the last judgment. It seems every other road sign along Interstate 85 in South Carolina is an inquiry about your readiness to meet the Lord. Could they be right?

It makes us anxious because we're not to sure what we think about it. Every week we confess it in the creed, but what are we confessing? Is this good news or bad news? Are we preparing for the return of the Jesus of vacation bible school or the "Terminator"? I have to believe it was a Presbyterian who invented the "Look busy, Jesus is coming" bumper sticker, because we're not to sure what else to do about it.

Few texts in the bible raise the question better than the one we are looking at today. The glorious Son of Man, Jesus, gathers the world before himself, dividing them into sheep and goats. Some inherit the Kingdom of God. Some depart for the eternal fire. And both seem to be surprised at the outcome.

We don't have to understand all the details to understand the main point: there will be an end to the story, a final judgment. Shall we say "Yikes!" or "Hallelujah!"?

II.

We can get some help handling this part of the creed by trying to answer two questions. The first is, “Who is the judge?” And the answer is simple: It is Jesus himself!

The Son of Man who returns to judge the nations at the end of the age is Jesus. We know him. He has lived for us, he has died for us, he rose for us, and he reigns in power for us. The Dr. Jekyll doesn't suddenly become Mr. Hyde at the end of time.

So the judgment rendered by Jesus has to make sense of the life he lived among us. The writer of the letter to Hebrews says to his church, that's great news!

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace in our time of need. (4:15)

The Jesus who saved his people by grace through faith in his power to forgive sins, doesn't suddenly become our accountant at the end of time and award heaven on the basis of our moral checkbook balance.

It makes no sense for a Christian to cringe at the thought of the final judgment. It also makes no sense for a Christian to assume God's grace is an excuse to live a morally spineless life. It appears in this text that the Christ who has saved us by his grace will at the very least take great notice of what we did with it.

The greatest opportunity the Christian faith offers us is not keeping the rules; it's knowing the judge. To know the way of the judge in his ministry and his mercy, his justice and his sacrifice on our behalf, is the way to form our lives for final judgment without fear in our hearts.

Our hope is not in something but in someone. Christians do not believe that it is someone other than Jesus who comes as judge at the end of history. His judgment will make sense of the life he lived and the death he died for the sake of the world.

III.

It helps to know the judge. But that also begs the question, “Why must there be a judgment anyway? Aren’t we too “modern” for that kind of talk?”

We can’t dodge these kinds of questions. Is the purpose of Jesus Christ, and the Christian faith, at the end of time to inflict punishment on unbelievers and evildoers, or is it something else or something more?

Lots of us have been brought up with a story of the Christian faith that says salvation is about who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. God is the producer of a three act play.

Act one is creation – God made the world good. Act two is the Fall – men and women sinned and made a mess of the world and their lives. Act three is redemption – Jesus lived, died, and rose again for the forgiveness of sins. Believe in him and you will avoid hell – salvation. The second coming means time for making decisions has run out – Jesus will be seen for the judge that he is, by all.

That’s part right and quite wrong. God is the producer of a four act play. Act one is good creation. Act two is the Fall into sin. Act three is the redemption from sin through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But act four is recreation of this world into the world God created it to be – one of justice, peace, and the presence of the Lord. (The Book of Revelation ends with the picture of a new heaven and a new earth; not the question “If you die tonight, where will you spend eternity?”)

Jesus returns to finish what redemption began. He returns to claim victory. The purpose of God’s final judgment is to put creation right. And what happens to you and me – the heaven and hell question – is part of the story. But it’s not the point of the story.

In Matthew 25 the “sheep” are those who recognize what Jesus is doing in the world, and set about to do it themselves. The “goats” are those who don’t recognize what Jesus is doing in the world and have shown no interest in aligning themselves with it. The final destiny of their lives makes eternal sense of which great project they have invested themselves in.

The final judgment of Jesus is first about finishing what the love of God started. It is about restoration, healing, justice, and resurrection from the dead. Only then is it about men, women, and their place in eternity.

IV

Beliefs have consequences. If we believe in final judgment, this kind of judgment, what difference could it make?

Many years ago C.S. Lewis wrote some words that still speak today:

If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The apostles themselves, who set on foot the conversion of the Roman empire, the great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English evangelicals who abolished the slave trade, all left their mark on earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this one. Aim at heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in'. Aim at earth and you will get neither.

At the very least we shouldn't be embarrassed when someone questions our story of a final judgment. Their story of reincarnation, karma, or "this life only" is no easier to prove than ours. The bigger question is what kind of world is the final fruit of their kind of faith?

To believe in the second coming of Jesus Christ and the final judgment is to believe that our lives are part of a story that is going someplace. Justice prevails. Life isn't spinning your wheels until you're just too tired to spin them any longer. We are contributing to the picture that God is painting of the end of the world. A life lived in faithfulness to the agenda of Christ, is a life invested in the things that will persist.

We might even find ourselves experiencing some of that resilient joy that comes from being part of one project that comes with the divine guarantee of success. The Kingdom is coming, the one we pray for every week! The One who was, and is, is to come. The world is not going to hell in hand basket. To be biblical about it heaven is coming to earth. Wouldn't it change our experience of tomorrow, no matter how happy or bleak tomorrow may be, if know we are under the care of the shepherd of history?

V.

Jesus is coming. Are you embarrassed, afraid, or expectant?

What happens when people take God's judgment seriously? One writer of the Old Testament book of Psalms says it like this:

Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it. Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; 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. (Psalm 98:8-9)

Come to think of it judgment is looking better all the time.