

ADVENT REFLECTION 3

Advent 3: The last things

Traditionally one of the themes in Advent is that of the last things – i.e. the return of Christ and the final judgement. But the trouble is that word “judgement” tends to conjure up totally negative pictures. Sometimes indeed it is pictures – some older churches have a doom painting over the chancel arch, depicting the last judgement, and one side will show the guilty being pitchforked down into hell. Often you get the impression the artist rather enjoyed painting that! And sometimes too preachers have been only too glad to preach the themes of sin and judgement, producing a sense of fear, shame and guilt.

Recently I have read several people writing about having been brought up on a version of Christian faith that was all about these themes, and even when salvation was preached, it still seemed to be heavy on such ideas.

Now, obviously judgement is a genuine biblical theme, and one we need to take seriously. But we equally need to look carefully at what Jesus did and said, and in particular how he responded to people. We see that while his words were sometimes deeply challenging, at other times he emphasised God’s love for the lost – e.g. the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son. And he spent time with people of all sorts, and was very ready to pronounce forgiveness – e.g. the woman taken in adultery. He did not inculcate a religion of fear and shame. Indeed he strongly criticised those who did produce such a religion – as in the blistering Matthew chapter 23.

One particular parable of Jesus is particularly relevant here – the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31-46. Undoubtedly it is a picture of judgement, and yet so much of the stress in the parable is on how we treat people here and now – e.g. feeding (or failing to feed) the hungry – and it looks as though Jesus’ aim was not to make people feel guilty, but to make them (and us!) think about how we live life, and how we treat those in need.

So, 4 down-to-earth things to take from all this:-

First, the need to be honest with ourselves and before God. No cover-up. (If only there was less cover-up in public life – the infected blood scandal, the Post Office scandal, etc. and sadly church cover-ups too). For us, the confession in church services offers time for honesty and true repentance.

Second, the assurance of forgiveness. Jesus’ aim was always restoration and healing. Paul emphasises “we **have** peace with God”.

Third, to live as those who belong to Jesus and truly seek to follow him.

Fourth, to ensure that in our churches we model a version of Christian faith that does not breed a sense of shame, but that lifts people up and brings them to the love of God.

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