

Sermon Notes for Advent IV

“sheep and goats” (Matthew 25)

The traditional topic for Advent is the Four Last Things. These are easily preached as we will all have to face them – and have only vague information about them (apart from death in its earthly aspect). But how does God see them? “God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good.” Even death and hell? There is an argument (in the book of Wisdom) that death is not part of the original purpose, but I am not convinced that God has afterthoughts.

Two topics are confused here. In both cases, the road leads by way of death and judgement. One is God's positive purpose, which ends (for the faithful) in heaven. The other is God's justice. It seems an important and indeed positive matter that wickedness should have its due reward. One may suspect that there is an element of misunderstanding about justice. For most of the Old Testament, and indeed some of the New, justice is about God acting as a hero-figure, *occasionally intervening* to give the oppressed their rights – which will indeed include the punishment of the oppressor. This is very different from the view we easily assume of impartial justice inexorably delivered.

Now the difficulty with earthly wickedness is that it is inherently finite. Long indeed may be the punishment justly due to a mass-murderer concerning each one of his victims, and there are many victims. But this still only requires a finite punishment. Yet the idea of punishment in hell is that it is eternal – and so not finite. If we are to justify infinite punishment, then we need a corresponding sin. The conventional answer in the West was that the issue was less about sins against man than the one sin of rebellion against God, which might be in some cases argued to be both deliberate and fundamental, so infinite. Yet even this has the risk of making God out to be petulant, acting (however justly) to preserve his wounded dignity. This does not sound quite right.

But God has to do something about sin. Precisely because the root of sin is rebellion against God, the sinner could not be happy with God. Indeed, one might argue that the most cruel punishment available would be the compulsory experience of the genuine bliss of heaven! (This is not very far from the seven corresponding ways of bliss and misery in 4 Esdras VII 81-99, part of the verses only recovered for Anglican bibles in the nineteenth century). (It is an incidental point that we all bring such elements of sin with us that we do need a cleansing before we can cope with heaven. This is purgatory – where those who know they are saved are rendered fit for heaven.)

We might do better to understand the punishment of the wicked in terms of God's mercy rather than his wrath. He is not a torturer (however just), but he may intervene to provide damage limitation for the wicked (see C S Lewis “The Pilgrim's Regress”) or even opportunity for repentance (C S Lewis “The Great Divorce”) - though there are church pronouncements against hoping for this.

Be careful in the understanding of picture language. The bible has and can have nothing else when it suggests aspects of either hell or heaven. We are too prone to make it flatly descriptive. And there is also the risk of confusing Dante and Milton (or medieval doom paintings) with scripture.

Also, much of what we have is instructional rather than descriptive in its purpose. Now the common way of giving advice is the “two ways” and the need to choose between them. No preacher suggests a middle course of mediocrity. (Kipling's “Tomlinson” is appropriate here.) Much life is lived in virtually indistinguishable shades of grey; it is the task of the preacher, as it will be the experience of the Last Judgement, to sharpen the contrasts, reveal the hidden tendencies, until only black and white, sheep and goats, are left. Hebrew thought always tends that way; we may feel it is not a very accurate account of human nature or modern problems, but remember Who we are criticising!

The truth, I think, is that we cannot hope to understand well how God copes with the situation when his good will for man is rejected. And it is not very important to us. The bible is not a systematic theology in which the answer to every possible question is accurately provided. I do not say that it is wrong to try to write such a document, but it will never be better than an approximation.

We do not have to know the mind of God for the wicked in order to live well. We do know the purpose of God, for that is the work of reconciliation in his Son. The collect for Easter Even is a good summary: “that as we are baptized into the death of thy blessed Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, so by continual mortifying our corrupt affections we may be buried with him; and that through the grave and gate of death, we may pass to our joyful resurrection”.