

## **When the Shepherd-King comes in His glory...**

(Matthew 25:31)

“If you approach now, you will receive both grace and mercy, for you approach ‘in due season,’ but if you approach, at the Day of Judgement, you will no longer receive it.....Now is the time of the gift; let no man despair of himself. When the bride chamber is shut there will be the time of despairing.” (St Gregory Palamas, Homily VII on Hebrews IV)

It is not uncommon to encounter churchgoers, Catholic and Orthodox, who have but the vaguest idea of what systematic theology calls the Last Things. Although they regularly hear the Symbol of Faith, the Nicene Creed, with its clause, “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead...” they would have difficulty in explaining what is meant by these words. And, of course, many relegate the personal judgment after death to *the not to be thought about*.

However, it is clear from the words of Jesus that we will be held accountable for the way in which we have lived. And we have but two choices - to accept what he says and act upon it, or reject what he says and suffer the consequences. However, in making that decision, one way or the other, we should keep in mind the words of St Thomas Aquinas, “What God’s Son has told me, take for truth I do. Truth himself speaks truly or there’s nothing true.” (trans. G. M. Hopkins)

In the story of the rich man and the poor man (Lk 16:19-31) Jesus teaches that after death there is a personal judgment – and that there is no possibility of escaping either it or the verdict. St Paul reminds us that “it is appointed for us to die but once, and after this there comes judgment.” (Heb 9:27)

Today, the Church calls us to think upon the reality of the Last or General Judgment at the Second Coming. And when will that be? – “...no one knows; not the angels, not the Son, but only the Father.” (Mt 24:36) However, that day will come – either before you have finished reading this or in a billion years. All speculation, as in the cults, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses or Seventh Day Adventists, is idle and non-scriptural.

The details may not be clear, however, the Second Coming, the Parousia - and the accompanying judgment – is a fundamental component of our Faith. Although the Parousia will occur in the future, Jesus sets the consequences very much in terms of the here and now.

Christianity is not social work with a passing reference to God, and it certainly is not a set of abstract beliefs which places us in isolation from the real world. St James warns us that “faith without works is dead.” (Jas 2:17). The Buddhists teach that *right thoughts give rise to right actions*.

Beginning with the Acts of the Apostles, Christian history is the account of Faith interwoven with a dynamic concern for others. There has never been a human suffering that the Church did not attempt to relieve. The study of the establishment, funding and staffing of hospitals, clinics, leprosaria, refuges and orphanages in the Byzantine Empire is an academic discipline in itself.

On the Last Day, when the Shepherd King comes again, He will divide humanity into “doers” and “non-doers”. Notice that in today’s pericope, the Righteous Judge, does not single out emperors or empresses, founding monks, nuns or doctor-saints, important as these and others have been. While, He addresses what has been done, He does not name who has done what....and He places all these deeds of love, in terms of Himself; and again what has not been done, He places in terms of Himself.

Have you ever seen a bag lady, a doorway dweller, a girl working the corner, a drunk or druggie in the gutter – and not said a prayer for them? And afterwards, have you at least

placed something in the poor box, or made a donation at the St Vincent de Paul shop, or offered your time and talents to a church charity?

We should keep in mind the words of St Basil the Great, “When someone steals another's clothes, we call them a thief. Should we not give the same name to one who could clothe the naked and does not? The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry; the coat unused in your closet belongs to the one who needs it; the shoes rotting in your closet belong to the one who has no shoes; the money which you hoard up belongs to the poor.”

As well, we should remember that our works of charity and kindness should also touch the souls of others. As St Theophylact of Ochrid (1055-1107) writes, “...practice almsgiving, both *material* and *spiritual*. Feed Christ Who hungers for our salvation. If you give food and drink to him who hungers and thirsts for teaching, you have given food and drink to Christ...” (The Explanation, p.221)

Above all, for us, as Christians, the measure by which we judge all our actions for the sake of others must be our love for Christ. As St Paul writes when to the Corinthians, “The love of Christ drives us on.” (2Cor. 5:4)

**NOTE:** Today is popularly known as Meatfare Sunday. The –fare part of the word comes from the late Middle English word *farin*, -to go, as in, for example, farewell. This Sunday we say farewell, goodbye, to meat until the celebrations of Pascha. The western Latin equivalent is *carnevale*. Today, we traditionally feast on meat dishes; and it would be a good occasion to enjoy a family barbeque with relatives and friends – provided, of course, we were serious about keeping the rest of the meat-free Lenten fast.

**Archdeacon Anthony Lawrence**