

3^d Sunday of Advent

Judgement and Repentance. Too much to bear on top of everything else this year?

Many people have already slid into Christmas - Advent's moody depths just too much to ask?

But maybe it's not repentance and judgement that's the problem, it's that **we *misunderstand* judgement and repentance.**

Fr Stephen unpacked this for us in his sermon in the YouTube Eucharist on Advent Sunday. Let's look again at repentance and judgment – not 'trendifying', not watering, no consumerist 'pick'n'mix' here. Let's see Advent's cry of judgement and repentance properly and clearly.

So often our theology of judgment comes from experience of *earthly* judgment - God is just a big angry Victorian high court judge, or repentance is coloured by our human experience of guilt or shame.

But this just doesn't work when we're speaking of God. We have to smash these clay jars we try to put God into.

Repentance is not masochist guilt-mongering, it is the call to a new and life-giving way. It is a relationship with God,

ourselves and each other, that is genuinely deep and transformative.

That is a Christian understanding of repentance, put aside sadistic schoolmasters in Dickens.

Judgement, likewise, is not a threat hanging over our heads until God comes back into the room with punishment in one fist and prize in the other. *It is a setting straight, and a revealing of truth, of how things really are; so that ultimately all things can drawn together in Christ, healed and whole.*

That's the judgement and repentance God gives us in the Christ we meet in the Gospels:

[8.30am: the judgment, in today's Epistle, that is not and never *ours*, or on our terms, or by *our* standards, but that will come with Christ when He returns.

In today's Gospel, we hear of St John the Baptist – not a reed blown in the wind – but 'more than a prophet', administering baptism of repentance and calling God's people back – 'make straight the way of the Lord' to come and liberate]

{11am: In today's Gospel we are reminded of St John the Baptist's baptism of repentance. Calling us back – 'make straight the way of the Lord', to come and liberate.}

So, judgment is not prosecution or be-wigged judges. The shock tactics of the few mentions of hellfire are to shake open the religious authorities of the day, to clear space for Jesus to work.

Time and again, if we dig behind Jesus's images of judgement we find that His judgment is *revealing* not condemning: cutting the nonsense and allowing truth to emerge that it may be healed and made whole. That is what will happen to us when we meet Jesus the judge: all our pomp and fakery and nonsense will be stripped away, and we will be left with only Him, only the *real* us, and only love. *That* is Christian judgment.

{ 11am: Just think of those ancient and radical words in today's first reading from the prophecy of Isaiah }

The Kingdom is purifying: revealing truth, liberating real life from all the rubbish that gets in the way. **Again and again if we bother to dig through the imagery we find that in Scripture God's judgment is re-creation not retribution.** It is not always *comfortable*, certainly, the 'refiner's fire'. But true love, true prayer, true healing rarely are. Not comfortable, but good.

Be gone shiny suited preachers of superficial brimstone and angry sandwich boards on Oxford Street.

Christian judgment is what we will profess in the creed in a moment.

Likewise, with repentance. A Hebrew core of repentance is ‘shuv’: ‘to return’. Just as ‘conversion’ is to turn back ‘con’ ‘versio’.

So, the Christian call to repentance isn’t about wallowing, *stuck* in guilt and sin, it is an invitation home! It isn’t stagnant, but a positive journey: *turning back* to the source of life. Like a child who storms out ‘never to return’ but gets no further than the end of the street before coming home, we puff ourselves up and wander stupidly about most of the time, as God patiently waits for us to return.

However often or far we go, in all the little and big ways we wander off the way that our loving Father has prepared for us knowing better than we where our real life and joy and peace is, that way always remains for us to turn back to. Back to the most important relationship we could ever have: us and God our Father, doing life together.

Repentance and judgement. The stripping away of nonsense until only love is left. The constant invitation to do life with God as we journey home to Him.

This is what we find in the Scriptures and the tradition of Holy Mother Church, *this* is what Jesus is bringing with power and great glory.

Maybe it's just what we need at the end of 2020 after all...

Maranatha, come Lord Jesus.