

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, December 16, 1990, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MALACHI 3:2 and JOHN 3:19

“But who may abide the day of His coming?
And who shall stand when He appears?”

“And this is the judgment, that the light
has come into the world, and men loved
the darkness rather than the light.”

ADVENT AND JUDGMENT

The four Sundays before Christmas are called, in the Christian calendar, the Sundays of Advent. The word “adventus” in Latin means a “coming” or an “arrival”; and for Christians, Advent means the coming to our little planet of God the Son, to seek and to save lost sinners. During the season of Advent, we think with joy of the mighty acts of God whereby He came to us in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, that the world through Him might be redeemed.

No doubt many of you are wondering why on earth I should feel obliged to speak today on the subject, “Advent and Judgment,” because the idea of judgment seems about the least appropriate theme that anyone could speak about during Advent. “After all, Christmas is a time of good cheer,” you remind me. “We sing happy carols, and make high holiday, and live in an atmosphere of good will at Christmas. Surely to talk about judgment at such a time as this seems like dragging a skeleton into the feast!”

And looking at the matter theologically, judgment doesn’t seem the proper theme for Advent. For what does Christmas celebrate? It celebrates the arrival of God the Son upon planet earth. And what brought Him from Heaven’s glory to this sin-stained world? What made Him exchange the ecstasy of heaven for the manger in Bethlehem, for the carpenter’s shop in Nazareth, for the Cross on Calvary’s hill, and the borrowed tomb in Joseph’s garden? What made Him do it? It was love -- love for you and for me! What is the best-known and best-loved verse in all the Bible? It is John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His Only Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

As Christina Rossetti puts it:

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love Divine;
Love was born at Christmas,
Stars and angels gave the sign.

And so, love would seem to be the inevitable theme for the Advent season.

And yet, when we study the Scriptures closely, we discover that both in the Old Testament

and in the New Testament, the idea of judgment is associated with the coming of the promised Messiah. The old preachers of the Middle Ages had grasped this truth very insightfully, with the result that the four subjects which they invariably addressed during the Sundays of Advent were: “Death,” “Judgment,” “Heaven,” and “Hell”! Just imagine preaching on “Hell” on Christmas Sunday! And yet, when you think about it, isn’t Hell the inevitable consequence of rejecting that “Love Divine” that came down at Christmas? The writer to the Hebrews asks the grim but realistic question, “How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation” as Jesus came to provide?” (Hebrews 2:3).

Let me turn with you to the Old Testament first. From the coming of sin into the world, God promised a “Deliverer,” a “Redeemer.” And all through the Old Testament we find this glorious expectation of a coming Messiah. But when prophets wrote about His coming, their expectation was like a thread with a double strand of black and white. It was associated with ideas both of joy and of fear.

The predominant feeling created by the hope of the Messiah was undoubtedly that of joy. They honestly believed that Messiah, when He came, would bring deliverance. He would rescue His people from the oppression of foreign invaders and restore the kingdom to Israel. It was this indomitable hope which sustained and comforted them during the dark and terrible days of their exile in Babylon, and later when they groaned beneath the yoke of Rome. They stubbornly pinned their faith upon the watchword, “Messiah is coming!” That expectation is reflected in the great 13th century hymn of the Church:

Oh come, Oh come, Immanuel,
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Immanuel
Shall come to thee, Oh Israel.

But along with their joy there went also a sense of fear. For as time passed, God revealed to His people that He had no delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices (Psalm 51:16). What He wanted from them was holy and obedient living. People who acted justly, and loved mercy, and walked humbly with their God, these and these alone were God’s true people (Micah 6:8).

And when Messiah would come, He would act in judgment. In Amos 9:9 (Good News Bible) God says, “I will give the command and shake the people of Israel like grain in a sieve. I will shake them among the nations to remove all who are worthless,” He would sift out the righteous from the ungodly, the wheat from the weeds. He would judge the earth.

And Malachi, at the prospect of such a judgment, exclaims with a shudder of fear, “But who will be able to endure the day when He comes? Who will be able to survive when He appears? He will be like... a fire that refines metal. He will come to judge like one who refines and purifies silver” (Malachi 3:2,3, Good News Bible).

Coming now to the New Testament, we find that what the Old Testament prophets

foresaw as the effect of Messiah's coming was exactly what did happen when Jesus came. There was a judgment. It was not that Jesus came in order to judge. As St. John reminds us, "God did not send His Son into the world to be its Judge, but to be its Savior" (John 3:17, Good News Bible). "Saving", not "judging", was God's purpose in sending Christ. I have always liked that little chorus we used to sing in young people's meetings that went like this:

He did not come to judge the world,
He did not come to blame;
He did not only come to seek,
It was to save He came;
And when we call Him Savior...
Then we call Him by His Name.

But the actual and inevitable result of our Lord's coming into the world was judgment. By His mere presence amongst men He judged them. Listen again to what St. John says, "This is how the judgment works: The Light has come into the world, but people love the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds are evil. Anyone who does evil things hates the light and will not come to the light, because he does not want His evil deeds to be shown up" (John 3:19,20, Good News Bible).

Jesus is the Light. He reveals to us what our life ought to be. If we want to be what God wants us to be, we will follow Jesus. If we want to run our own life, we will turn away from Jesus. But if we turn away from Him, our judgment has already begun, for we love the darkness rather than the light.

Do you understand now why Advent and Judgment are inseparable? Jesus did not come to judge, but He judges in spite of Himself. His very presence here today is a judgment! Again, in that magnificent third chapter of John's Gospel we read, "Whoever believes in the Son is not judged; but whoever does not believe has already been judged, because he has not believed in God's only Son" (3:18, Good News Bible).

It is true to say, isn't it, that we judge in every department of life by reference to certain standards.

a. We have certain standard weights and measures. When I was growing up, a state inspector would periodically visit every store where there were scales. He would bring with him standard weights and use those perfect weights to test or judge the shopkeeper's scales. And I have no doubt that the State of Virginia has the means of examining those computerized machines which weigh our merchandise in the supermarkets today.

b. We have our standards in art. There are certain great master paintings, and by them we judge all other paintings.

A man once entered a famous art gallery where some of the world's masterpieces were on view, and after gazing disinterestedly at them, he said, "Well, I don't see much in those to rave about!" Whereupon, the curator who was conducting him around, replied, "It is not you, Sir, who

are judging those pictures. It is the pictures that are judging you!”

c. Now the supreme standard in character is Jesus. He is the first and only Person this world has ever known Who lived a perfect life. And because in Him Perfection has come to the world, He is the Standard so far as human character is concerned. And because He is the perfect standard of human life, all other lives are judged by His. His presence in the world means judgment. In Him the “true Light” has come! (John 1:9).

Did you ever stand in a living room on an autumn afternoon and remark how clean everything looked? And then suddenly one solitary oblique shaft of sunlight broke through the clouds and came streaming in through the window! And, of course, at once you could see those horrible dust particles floating through the air; and worse still, you could not help but see the thin film of dust on the coffee table! The light judges and condemns!

Once cannibalism was not considered wrong. Do you know that it existed in Britain until the fourth century A.D.? But then the message of the Gospel reached those benighted people - the Light began to shine - and after that, cannibalism was rightly regarded as barbaric. Isn't it interesting that it was only 1500 years later, in the middle of the 19th century, when the Christian message reached the islands of the South Pacific, that those people gave up their cannibalistic practices?

Once polygamy was not considered wrong. The early part of the Old Testament is full of it. But then the Light came, and, ever since, anything less than the love of one man for one woman has been wrong.

Once it was not considered wrong to take vengeance on a personal enemy. In Old Testament times, there were cities of refuge to which a person might hasten for protection if he had unintentionally killed someone and feared that vengeance would be wreaked upon him. And then the Light came, and Jesus said, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). And ever since vengeance has been rightly regarded as sin.

Wherever the light shines, it reveals, it judges, and it condemns. Christ is still “the Light of the world” and those who follow Him “will never walk in darkness” (John 8:12). He is the final and ultimate test of character. People who, in their hearts love the good, are inevitably and irresistibly drawn to Him; while people who, in their hearts love evil, are repelled by Him. He reveals what is in a person's heart. Base and mean things cannot stand His presence just because they are revealed for the ugly things they really are.

A young army officer went out to France during World War I to find that the walls of the officers' mess were covered with all kinds of suggestive and indecent pictures. He was a Christian chap, and his soul revolted against what he saw. But he was a junior officer, and it would have been very difficult for him to make any formal protest. But he had as much right to put a picture on the wall as anyone else. He exercised his right and put up a small framed picture of our Lord. In a couple of days every other picture had disappeared! Christ had judged them, and in His presence their sordidness stood revealed.

Jesus judges all of us like that, too. In His presence, the baseness and evil of the human heart is shown up in its true colors. Confronted by Christ, we see ourselves as we really are; and when we do, there are only two courses open to us: we must either get rid of Him; or we must get rid of the sin which His presence reveals and condemns. The Pharisees did the one; Zacchaeus did the other.

The Pharisees, confronted by Christ, must have seen the shallowness and unreality of their own legalistic religion, but in their self-righteous pride, they resolved to get rid of Him Who troubled their conscience; and they never rested until they saw him impaled upon a Roman Cross.

Zacchaeus, on the other hand, when he came face to face with Jesus, saw the sordidness of his greed, his selfishness, and his dishonesty; and he exclaimed, "Lord, be merciful to me for I'm a miserable little hypocrite. Save me and transform my life; and with Your help I'll prove to the world that I'm a changed man!" (Luke 19:1-10).

We are not surprised that people who enjoy transgressing God's Law leave the Church severely alone. Here they would be confronted by the Light, and the Light would condemn them. Is it not significant that many totalitarian forms of government, which deny people their God-given rights, are atheistic, scoffing at the very concept of God? Other despots, such as Saddam Hussein, have "a form of godliness" as Paul says (2 Timothy 3:5), but they worship the false god of Islam who is far removed from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Is it any wonder that the pseudo-intellectuals who peddle the "New Morality," and scoff at chastity and other Christian virtues, have no time for Christ and His Church?

And, of course, it is not only the grosser sins that Christ exposes; but greed and materialism, envy and hatred, pride and selfishness and intolerance, all stand condemned. In the presence of Jesus their ugliness cannot be hidden.

It is well to remember that God doesn't wait until the final Judgment Day to show us what we are. Every day is verily a day of judgment. The Light has come. That is why Advent is inevitably connected with judgment.

And you and I this Advent Season must inevitably ask this personal question, "In which group do I stand? Am I amongst those who love the light, or those who love the darkness?" Those who love the light are certainly not perfect people by a long shot. They are still prone to sin. But they love Christ sincerely, and they honestly want to be delivered from everything that grieves Him. Those who love the darkness are those who say "No" to Christ, because there are sinful things in their lives which they love more than they love Him, and which they will not give up.

I ask again, "To which group do you belong?"

Two boys grew up together in a Midwestern town. They were inseparable companions. One summer day, while swimming, one lad got into difficulty, and his friend, by an act of sheer heroism, rescued him from drowning. As the years passed, their paths parted. One young man

took the high road, the other the low. Finally, they met again. The one was the judge on the bench, the other the prisoner in the dock on trial for his life. When the jury had brought in their verdict against the prisoner, the judge addressed the condemned man in a voice charged with emotion, and this is what he said,

“I was your savior once, but I am your judge now!”

It would be a tragedy, wouldn't it, if Jesus Christ, Who came to save us, should, at the last, only be our Judge?

AMEN.