

Advent is a season of expectation and preparation, as the Church prepares to celebrate the coming of Christ in his incarnation, and also looks ahead to his final advent as judge at the end of time. The readings and liturgies not only direct us towards Christ's birth, they also challenge the modern reluctance to confront the theme of divine judgement:

Every eye shall now behold him
robed in dreadful majesty. (*Charles Wesley*)

This is how the Church of England's introduction to Advent begins in *Times and Seasons*. Judgement it seems is something that the Church is beginning to grapple with once more.

In truth, notions of judgement had not gone away; whether this be in popular beliefs of karma (the circle of life) or in stories that nourish us; whether this be in the development of the kindly Nicholas who has evolved into Santa or Father Christmas, who of course judges whether or not someone is good enough to receive gifts to the spirit of Jacob Marley who warns Ebenezer Scrooge to reform or repent in Dickens's much loved *Christmas Carol*. The delight of the latter story is the individual redemption found together with the restoration of community relationships.

Christians who attend Churches which follow the Lectionary will be familiar with notions of judgement: God judges Israel and the nations in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament witness presents Jesus, the human who defeated death, as the one who will judge individuals and societies. Be that as it may, those of us who are Christians in western Europe are hesitant about judgement. This is perhaps largely because we are cautious about what happens to people, societies and nations following judgement: heaven has become universal and hell a little unpalatable for our 21st Century sensitivities.

This is where Tom Wright's observations about Paul's poem which is found in Philippians 2:6-11 are helpful;

⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The Christian faith unites around the belief that the one to whom every knee shall bow is the one who set aside all the trappings of majesty, suffered and died. For Tom Wright, every knee can bow because Jesus the Christ set everything aside. This hinted at in Mark 10:45 and Revelation 1:8.

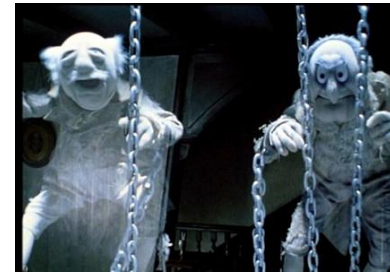
For Christians therefore that can be absolute confidence in the integrity and fairness of the one exercising judgement. The one who judges is one who has lived like us: grieving, laughing, loving, becoming angry, partying, confronting injustice, cherishing loved one, sharing hope-filled stories. Christians have long since seen that this is the God they worship; because their God is Jesus shaped. Such a God knows both the foibles and glories of humanity, not just through creative imagination, but through experience.

What might the judgement be like that such a God exercises? It will, I suggest, be like someone coming alongside us with a mirror; and we will see ourselves as we really are; as God sees us. The God, revealed throughout the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, is one that lavishes love on those made in his image. Part of God's judgement will be to show us how much love has been poured out upon us. This will be an uncomfortable experience for some of us;

human beings can push away unconditional love. Such a judgement may also involve us looking into the mirror and seeing what might have been if we had dared to believe how loved we are. This might produce tears; but such tears shared by a God who has demonstrated an ability to shed tears.

There in the garden
Of tears
My heavy load
He chose to bear
His heart with sorrow
Was torn
'Yet not My will
But Yours,' He said

Advent 2011



Theological Reflection

Judgement: what type of God?