

Advent Sunday 2/12/18 St Mary's Nantwich 8am & 10.45am

Jeremiah 33.14-16 1 Thessalonians 3.9-end Luke 21.25-36

One of the great themes of Advent is the Day of Judgement. It's there in all/both our readings. It's in the Collect Prayer. And of course it's in the Creed every week.

What kind of images or feelings are evoked when you hear of God's Day of Judgement, with a capital 'D' and a capital 'J'?

At the time this church was built Doom paintings were popular. There may have been one here for all we know. Most were destroyed at the Reformation. They were normally on the West wall, to warn the people as they were leaving church. They would see a division between heaven and hell, and possibly a ladder between the two. Some struggling up it, others tumbling back down it.

The painting and the preaching of judgement has in the past been used to motivate people by fear. There's not so much of it today, especially in the Church of England. We tend to avoid it. We think we've grown out of such mediaeval ideas. We know better. We don't need the prospect of judgement to stir us to good and honest living. We are our own judges.

Or are we? For once we leave a space where God's judgement used to be, we allow many other judges to crowd in. I want to warn you about three. I've called them the Judge of Christmas Past, the Judge of Christmas Present, and the Judge of Christmas Yet to Come. Unlike the Ghosts of Dickens' tale, these Judges are not there for our good, they don't show us the truth as Scrooge was shown it, in order to set him free. They bind us, they weigh us down, and they ultimately condemn us and pour guilt upon us.

The Judge of Christmas Past lies deep within. He originates from those early formative years of our lives when, even if we had a happy childhood, even if we had memorable Christmases, even if we received much unconditional love, we also picked up undesirable values and expectations and signals. Whether from our homes, friends, schools or wider society, we heard harmful messages about what we were worth, about what was wrong with

us, about what was required of us in order to be acceptable. We may have been in an environment that was predominantly wholesome. But it was certainly not perfect, and it doesn't take much that is negative to allow this Judge to develop and grow. He sits there like a pile of baggage stuffed away inside us or like an insatiable beast, always needing more. And he's only shifted by the light of truth.

The Judge of Christmas Present is much more visible. He's all over our screens today and in the magazines and on the High Streets. He holds before you a vision of the perfect Christmas: gifts ideally chosen, the latest electronics and the most fashionable perfumes, expensive clothes and the right party invitations, harmonious family gatherings, the richest food, and a warm glow radiating from each household member for 12 days. This Judge sets an impossible standard, and creates, if not fear, certainly anxiety. And he will always find you wanting.

The Judge of Christmas Future is in a different league. He constantly asks where you'll be next Christmas, and the ones after that. He will have you measuring your self-worth by the degree of financial security you have amassed, the social status you have achieved, the career ladder you have climbed or the physique you have maintained. And if he can, he'll then have you measuring yourself by how well your children or grandchildren are progressing in those same areas. He feeds you the lie that you can be in control and should be in control, yet no matter how much you achieve, you're always in the dock, never acquitted.

Together these judges create a picture of ugliness and horror as bad as any medieval doom painting.

The alternative to which the Gospel calls us is to be open to the judgement of God made present by the coming of Christ. Luke tells us what this openness means. Jesus says: stand up, look up, lift up your heads, guard your hearts, be alert, pray for strength. Wait and be expectant. He almost makes it sound like this judgement is something to look forward to.

But how can that be? Surely we will be found guilty? We only need to think of the 10 commandments. If the whole of our lives is to be reviewed, there'll be a very long list of

failures. How is this judge to be preferred over the Judges of Christmas Past, Present and Yet to Come?

There's one big difference. Our Scripture lessons speak of judgement, but at the same time they speak of salvation. From Jeremiah we heard of a Righteous Branch, which we now read as prefiguring Christ. This branch will execute justice (which sounds a bit scary) but also he is the means by which the people will be saved and live in safety. Luke speaks of fear and foreboding of what is to come on the world – yet he also says “raise your heads, because your redemption is coming near”. And the “coming” referred to in the Epistle is there throughout the letter, sometimes associated with pain or wrath, but also sometimes freedom and rescue.

To be open to God's judgement is not to be condemned as a failure, to be handed a verdict or worse a sentence. Our judge is also our saviour and deliverer. To be open to him is to place ourselves in his light, a light which both shows us for who we are and heals us, warms us by his love, draws us out of ourselves, and enables our flourishing into fuller life.

A part of our Anglican liturgy which often gets criticized is the prayer of humble access. “We do not presume to come to this thy table... We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table...” We've already made our confession, and then, before receiving communion, our noses are rubbed in the dust again.

It's a point easily made, but which do you prefer: those three judges who ask you to come with hands full, showing all you have achieved, how you've proved your worth. Or Christ who says come, but make sure it's empty-handed?

Do you prefer the three judges who offer you nothing – who only assess you against their demands? Judges whose property is always to condemn?

Or do you prefer a judge who insists only that you give up any idea that what you achieve can make him love you any more or any less? A judge whose property is always to have mercy.

Today we are reminded of a coming day of judgement, in order that in this Advent season we may prepare ourselves by being open now to this same judgement. It's a judgement which often may not be comfortable. Bright light can show up things we'd rather not see. But it is always for our health and our salvation.

So keep those Judges of Christmas Past, Present and Yet to Come in check, and look for ways to open yourself to Christ, the Judge who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, the same yesterday, today and forever. Who is ready with his gift for our open hands. Who is ready to grant us the grace to respond ourselves with thankfulness and generosity.

Have a good Advent. Give time to what may expose you to the healing light of judgement: worship together, fellowship, reading, time with people here whom you don't yet know. And so lift up your heads, guard your hearts, be alert, pray for strength, wait and be expectant.

*Mark Hart*