

“Credo, Third Series, Part VIII “..and he will come to judge...”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for May 3rd 2020 (Fourth Sunday of Easter/Good Shepherd Sunday)
by Foster Freed

John 5: 19-29

Having arrived...having **finally** arrived...at the concluding sentence of the Apostles' Creed's thick central paragraph, there is no point in denying the multiple challenges that present themselves to us with this, its bold final claim: the claim that “he will come to judge the living and the dead...”, a claim made with even greater flourish in the Nicene Creed which states: “He will come again **in glory** to judge the living and the dead, **and his kingdom will have no end.**” Powerful words! But yes, words which present multiple challenges, challenges which cannot simply be swept to the side.

The first of those challenges involves the “internal structure” of the great Christian creeds. We are well aware that Christian faith includes not only claims about Christ's **past**...

*...born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified,
died and was buried...*

...not only claims about Christ's **present**...

...is seated at the right hand of the Father...

...but also claims about Christ's **future**...

...he will come to judge the living and the dead.

That much seems more than clear. What can lead to some uncertainty, however, is that this note of judgment is generally regarded as part of the same series of “events” referenced at the conclusion of the Creed, in its final paragraph, dealing not with Christ but with the Spirit: a series which (at its most all-encompassing) can be seen to include “the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life-everlasting”. There is a sense in which the promised work of “Christ-the-judge” ought to be more closely linked with those other moments in the “final-drama” to which the Creed points. Indeed: that may well have prompted the shapers of the United Church of Canada's New Creed to place its recognition of Jesus Christ as “our **judge** and our hope” near the end, rather than in the middle, of its account of Christian faith.

At any rate: that is a comparatively minor matter although it does raise the intriguing question as to whether the “judgment” to which the Creed alludes is a specific reference to the end-of-**all**-time...

...what we commonly refer to as “The Last Judgment”...

...or a reference to a judgment experienced at the time of **our own** individual deaths. The scriptural evidence, I hasten to add, is ambiguous: there are texts that can be used to argue either case.¹ For my purposes this morning, I am content to leave that unresolved although the very fact that I will, subsequently, make a passing reference to the “near-death experience” literature that has grown so impressively during our life-times, can certainly be taken as an indication of the fact that I anticipate at least some form of judgment at the very instant we depart this world. But I am getting ahead of myself.

I referred earlier to the multiple challenges we face at this point in the Creed; none of them is more telling than the vivid images brought to mind when reference is made to Christ “coming again”. Indeed! It is impossible for any scripturally literate person not to find themselves, at precisely this juncture, pondering not only the **abstract** thought of a “second coming”, but also the **concrete** pictures the New Testament paints for us, especially in the apocalyptic sections of the synoptic Gospels (Mark 13, Matthew 24, Luke 21) and the even more lurid images to be found throughout the book Revelation. Especially when the events depicted in the pages of Revelation are utilized as a coded-script for historical events taking place in our own epoch, the response...

...not only of mainline Protestantism but of much Catholic and Orthodox and even mainline Evangelical thought...

...the response has tended to be an extremely cautious one. Much as I would love to pretend that I hold the answer-key as to how to read the Bible’s final book, I freely confess: that key has not yet been handed to me! For that reason, I am far more concerned with--and the remainder of my thoughts, this morning, will therefore revolve around--the specific assertion being made here vis a vis **the task** Christ will undertake when he does return: that he will do so as **Judge**. From where I stand, that crucial affirmation--rather than the specific contours of the “when” and the “how” of his return--forms the heart of the matter. Not that I am under the illusion that I have thereby banished all of the issues, questions and concerns raised--at this juncture--by the Creed. On the contrary!

Seems to me, that the really big issue here involves the word “judge” as in: “he will come to **judge** the living and the dead”. To be honest: I cannot recall ever participating in a study group--certainly not a United Church of Canada study group!--in which the thought of being judged...

...even by God...

...has not revealed a great deal of unease. And you know! Why shouldn’t it produce in us at least some measure of discomfort? How could it **not** produce in us at least some measure of discomfort? None of us enjoy being the subject of external critique; in our more truthful moments, we do a pretty good job of critiquing

ourselves, of judging ourselves. The thought of Christ as friend, as brother, as rescuer, as Savior--for that matter as Shepherd!--all bring comfort. The thought of him as judge? Not quite so comforting....not by a country mile.

Permit me...permit me to tackle this in stages. And permit me, first and foremost, to insist that the promise of ultimate judgment, is a promise that ought to be heard as part and parcel (rather than as the antithesis) of the good news of Jesus Christ. We, in the justice-seeking tradition of the United Church of Canada, ought to know that as well (if not better) than any other Christian tribe! If justice matters to us...if we actually mean what we say when we speak of ours being “the faith that **does** justice”...then we of all people, ought to know that neither “justice” nor the “truth” of our lives would be honoured were we not subject to judgment. Before we dismiss, too hastily, the thought of “judgment”, we need to place side-by-side with that weighty word, other weighty words such as “responsibility” and “accountability”. Would we really wish to live in a world in which all of our actions--our choices, our decisions, our responses to life’s challenges and opportunities--were ultimately revealed to have been meaningless? Would we really prefer to be part of a universe in which there was no real distinction between truth and falsehood, compassion and cruelty, love and indifference? I, for one, would not: even though that will likely entail an uncomfortable confrontation with the shadow-side of my life here on earth. Without presuming that I fully comprehend that which awaits me--that which awaits us--on the other side of the life of this world, I not only expect (but would, frankly, be surprised) were our future to **not** entail the opportunity to hear pronounced the verdict (and, hopefully, to learn from the verdict) pronounced on the role I chose to play within this world. And who better....

....who better to pronounce that verdict, than Jesus Christ? I must here confess! When I first began wrestling with this portion of the Creed, I presumed that I would select--for our scripture text--the well-known final parable in Matthew’s Gospel, in which the Son of Man divides the sheep from the goatsⁱⁱ. The importance of that parable cannot be overstated: given its clear prioritizing of acts of compassion as the standard by which we will, in the end, be judged. Nor should it be overlooked that those who are entirely outside the Church...

...those who, in the parable, do not recognize “the Son of Man”...

...will be judged by the same standard. Were the hungry fed? The naked clothed? The homeless sheltered? The sick and imprisoned visited? To repeat what was noted earlier! Whatever awaits us in the life beyond the life of this world, God’s in-breaking future takes as its foundation not “make-believe”, but the actuality of the lives we have lived here: not only those things done that ought not to have been done but perhaps more significantly, those things that ought to have been done but were left undone. None of that is hidden from the sight of God; none of that, in the end, will be hidden from our own eyes. That parable cannot be side-stepped, when we speak of judgment in the context of the Gospel. Nevertheless!

If, in the end, I was drawn to the fifth chapter of John's Gospel, that has much to do with the way in which John--in that chapter--leaves no doubt about the **identity** of the One who occupies the judgment seat: no doubt as to the identity of the "Son of Man" who will come to be our judge. The logic here seems clear. Judgment is entrusted to the Son-of-God, because the Son of God is also the Son of Man. We are to come, at the end of **our** time/at the end of **all** time, into the presence of One who has walked this walk, One who has borne this flesh, One who is not a stranger...but a teacher...a brother...a friend.

For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.

There is a certain irony...a certain irony in turning to John's Gospel as a place from which to ponder the judgment **to come**. A certain irony because John--more than any other New Testament voice--is reluctant to place too much emphasis on that which is to come. For John, the "last things"--including the "last" judgment--are "things" which **have already** taken place: in and through the death and resurrection of Christ. At one especially crucial juncture of John's Gospel (just prior to the lengthy depiction of the Last Supper which, in John, occupies a pride of place it finds nowhere else in the New Testament), Jesus is heard to cry out: **Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out.**ⁱⁱⁱ There is a sense, you see, in which judgment, for John, is already behind us; a sense in which we have already been judged and found wanting, a sense in which our participation (side by side with the "ruler of this world") in the "death of God" has already sealed our fate and yes...

...a sense in which the judgment we have, in effect, pronounced against ourselves has already received its definitive response: with God's refusal to permit our "no" to God to stand as the final word. With the miracle of Easter--with His return from, His triumph over the realm of death--not only has it been made clear that Christ was not finished with us but made equally clear that we are not yet finished with Him.

And I am reminded here...reminded of a tradition--going right back to the Old Testament book Exodus--that speaks of the "mercy seat" of God.^{iv} The tradition of the "mercy seat" is picked up in the language of the New Testament when it speaks of Jesus as the "propitiation" or the "full payment" for that which ails the human race.^v Indeed: at the heart of the Gospel there appears to be the conviction that the Cross-itself is the mercy-seat, the place where the "great-exchange" takes place...the place where the "Judge" undergoes the "judgment", the place where we learn that the judgment that **will be** pronounced has been decisively impacted by the judgment **that has already taken place**.

*He came from his blest throne,
salvation to bestow,
but people scorned and none
the longed for Christ would know.
But O my Friend, my Friend indeed,
who at my need his life did spend!^{vi}*

When viewed from within the context of the New Testament and the great tradition founded upon the New Testament, what emerges with unmistakable power is this: any Christian attempt at assessing the meaning of judgment--the meaning of **the** judgment--which fails to take into account both Good Friday and Easter, is an assessment that is bound to fall far short of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I suppose...I suppose, at the end of the day, where I find myself is with twin convictions, **both** of which I firmly endorse. The first conviction is this: I firmly believe that it is terrifying to ponder a future in which justice will not have a say; a future in which the word of justice will not be spoken, spoken in ways that cannot simply be swept aside. And yet, my second conviction is this: at the same time I **also** believe that it is terrifying to ponder a future in which strict justice has the final word; a future in which the word of mercy will not be given a place, a voice, a time in which to be heard.

And it is here that I feel the compunction to visit--as I promised I would visit--one of the "insights" I have derived from the many testimonies I have read in our epoch's proliferating "near-death" literature. By way of preface let me say, on the one hand, that we ought always to be cautious in our use of those testimonies, but--on the other hand--insist that they are part and parcel of the world in which we now live, largely thanks to the medical advances that can bring people back from the brink of death. The particular relevance, in this present context, of at least some near-death accounts, involves what is generally referred to as the "life-review": a part of the "near-death" experience for some but by no means for all who have undergone a near-death experience. What I find fascinating in so many of those testimonies, is that, for them, the experience of reviewing their lives...

...often with brutal frankness...

...transpires in the presence of a love so pure and intense, that their experience of "judgment" is far different than any they would have anticipated. That experience, astonishingly, manages to combine (on the one hand) an unvarnished look at the truth of "their life", joined (on the other hand) to an affirmation of their "personhood" that is so rich and pure they generally conclude that there are no words with which they are able to describe the intensity of the love they experience at that moment. And I am reminded here...

...reminded of some potent words from Ephesians, words which form part of that epistle's encouragement for disciples: the encouragement for us to *grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ*. How are we to accomplish that? By learning to *speak the truth in love!*^{vii} By speaking the truth! But doing so in love! That juxtaposition of "love" and "truth" is powerful indeed: an invitation for us to be more Christ-like...and a hint...a hint at the "hope" that is ours **in Christ!** The hope that justice and mercy will not be strangers at the end of time. The hope that truth and love will both play their crucial role in the pronouncement of the judgment that awaits us: a judgment that awaits us through the radiant majesty...and the tender mercies...of the Son of Man...who will come to be our Judge!

May it be so! Thanks be to God!

A Prayer for Good Shepherd Sunday

Gracious and Holy God,
on this special Sunday,
as we ponder the ways of the Christ
we have named as the One who is to come,
the One who will come to be our Judge:
help us to recall that He remains--
even in judgment--
the One to whom we turn as our Good Shepherd,
who laid down his very life for the well-being of his flock.
May we come to trust
in the enduring nature of his love for us.
And may that trust equip us to live
courageously and compassionately,
embracing the time that is now,
embracing the freedom of the Gospel that is ours,
and risking all for Jesus Christ,
in whose name we pray.
Amen.

ⁱ Compare, for instance, 1st Thessalonians 4: 13-17 with Luke 23:43

ⁱⁱ The final of three "sobering" parables found in Matthew 25

ⁱⁱⁱ John 12: 31

^{iv} Exodus 25:19

^v The Greek word used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew of Exodus 25:19, is used at crucial places in the New Testament: Romans 3:25, Hebrews 9:5, 1st John 2:2 & 4:10.

^{vi} "My Song is Love Unknown", Words by Samuel Crossman, *Voices United* #143

^{vii} Ephesians 4:15