



Advent Sunday 4

THE NEW SHOFAR

Advent 4 - From Joyful return to terrible judgment

Luke 1:26-38 - nothing is impossible for God

December 24th, 2017

One day we are going to die – with no exceptions!

Why is it so few people in the Western world actually *die* anymore? Plenty “pass away”, some are “taken”, lots of them have “gone from us” and an incredibly large number of them are simply “lost”. As Christians we have a great deal to offer a world living in fear of the reality we call death. Up until the seventh century we looked forward to the *Return of the Son of Man in glory* but this then changed to an anxiety over the coming *Last Judgment*. It was partially a result of a shift towards a more individualistic view of life and The End, that time when we would face our day of judgment with its associated eternal punishments or rewards. Christian life and Christian mission therefore focussed more and more on the saving of souls.

But what is our soul? In our wonderfully scientific and mathematical world we seek to pin our souls down to being “something”, an intangible, eternal “something” within us but it is this kind of thinking that muddies the waters of our lives with God. Ratzinger says the soul is *nothing other than our capacity to be in relation with Truth, with Love eternal*. Terry Nichols speaks of it as being *a personal identity...capable of entering into personal experiences with others and with God*. Hard to digest these distilled “definitions” but their value is how they move our understanding of the soul from being an “inner something” to being an aspect of our *relationship*, of “being with others” (especially with God). This is why the soul survives death, because God has entered into a personal relationship with us. As Paul writes, *the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable (Romans 22:29)*. From this comes our understanding that the soul can exist apart from our bodies: it exists *in relationship with God*.

The soul exists beyond the grave

The Christian message regarding *the end* is how there is an ***Other*** who holds us in a loving embrace, who knows our deepest and innermost longings and fears, who offers us a love that is eternal. This is the ***Other*** made accessible to us in Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God. And dying is not about an end to all we have been and done during a lifetime. I love the preface of the funeral Eucharist: *indeed for your faithful, Lord, life is changed, not ended, and, when this earthly dwelling place turns to dust, an eternal dwelling is made ready for us in heaven*. Death is a part of the reality of life which is why our lives are so important in the shaping of the manner in which we move into death. We die as the person we have become, the person shaped by our every decision, our choices for or rejection of God. We are not simply the sum of what is left over when we add up our sinful acts and our

Advent points us to The End as we anticipate the birth of our Christ. Ponder the comments above about the “soul”. How do they help us avoid too much of a concentration on human acts? How can we ease human fear of

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good deeds.

The Day of Judgment – a Day for the anger of God?

The idea of there being a last judgment was a very late development in Judaism, coming with the writing of the Book of Daniel (164 – 167 B.C). It was quickly taken up by the apocalyptic writings. The souls of the righteous dead were said to continue to have a relationship with God and dwelt in *Sheol* while they awaited the final resurrection from the dead. On *that Day* the righteous will be separated from sinners (who are still to be punished for their sins). This *Day* was the *Day* towards which the whole of creation was moving and would be the *Day* when the divine plan for the whole of the cosmos would be vindicated. This is our *Last Judgment* parable from Matthew and is *the day of the son of Man* in other Gospels.

To this we must also add the New Testament's teaching on the *Parousia*, the *Day* when the Son of Man will return in glory as Judge. That *Day* will be preceded by signs in the heavens and, according to Paul, an Archangel will *sound the trumpet*, a sound that will raise up the dead from their graves and the living will be lifted up (the rapture for evangelicals).

Martin Luther spoke of having our fear of death being overcome by our being made acceptable to God through faith and argued with **Rome** over the role to be played out by good works, hope and love along with what role our freedom plays in our acceptance or rejection of this “being made righteous by God alone” plays in our lives as disciples. For **Calvin** things were simpler. The will is corrupt, unable to choose between good and evil, and so we are – apart from those already chosen by God for salvation – all predestined to eternal damnation.

Evil does not have the last word should be the clearest way into our pondering on what happens at “the End” for this is the divine drama we have witnessed (especially in the Bible) as God's saving activities have unfolded within human history. Out of evil good so often happens and in even the darkest of moments a little light will shine. This is echoed in the image of the crucifix – in God, the horrors of evil are transformed into new life. Death and its aftermath remain a mystery and so all we have to go on is what is revealed to us of the nature of God and our relationship within the Divine Being opened up for us by Jesus Christ. Whatever of the details, it will be a continuation of who we are here on earth. John Polkinghorne writes *just as a plant in a darkened cave will respond to the slightest glimmer of light that draws its growth in that direction, so we may hope that the slightest positive response to the light of God's presence will be enough to initiate in us the final work of salvation*. In the *end/End*, in living and in dying, our hope is in God. Our vocation, our role as believers is *responding to the slightest glimmer of light*, a light which is God all around us. As we respond we grow. As we grow, we grow others with us and at the same time we find ourselves building loving relationships, all of which help make us who we truly are. All of this is what we take to the grave, our human living rather than a list of good and bad deeds.

Our closing Advent reflections: It is the resurrection of Jesus that illustrates the way the power of God overcomes evil and how Divine Love conquers injustice in the age to come. Paul says *Christ will reign, putting his enemies under his feet, until the last enemy, death itself is destroyed, and will all things, subjected to Christ*. This is why death is not

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something to be feared, why St Francis of Assisi could refer to death as being *Sister Death*. We do not prepare for it with a last minute confession of sin but rather with a life lived in response to that glimmer of divine Light that is there shining in every moment and in every person. The rest we leave in the hands of God.