

“New Day, New Year, New Life” – Mat 25:31-46/Rev 21:1-6a – Dec 28/03

Well, here we are at the end of another calendar year, and the beginning of the next. My mother always said that the older you get, the faster the years go by, and she certainly was right! For me the years are starting to go past like fence posts on the highway, and I sometimes wonder whether as we go faster whether we’re getting any closer to where we want to be.

The early Christians in the new church, as it was founded by Paul and Peter and the other apostles, must have felt the same sense of time flying by ever and ever faster. Those early Christians had another worry as well, and that was the ever-lengthening delay in Jesus’ promised return. Jesus had told them while he was on the Mount of Olives about the coming destruction of the temple, and of the destruction of Jerusalem, and of the end of this present age, and had painted for them a picture of his coming as the Son of Man. Jesus also cautioned them that the exact time and date of these events was not cast in stone, and so they had to be vigilant during the uncertain time before his return. He even explained to the people listening to him how they were to behave during this time of uncertainty, using three parables as examples: the parable of the slave supervisor who misbehaved because he thought his master was delayed, the parable of the ten maidens waiting for the delayed bridegroom, and the parable of the talents where the master returned after a long time.

And it is here in our text that Jesus concludes his public ministry with his instructions on this subject of how to behave while waiting for his return. The instructions were to those who would await his return, and that includes us, as we also take our turn and eagerly await his return. Jesus reminded his listeners, and reminds us, that at the end of that waiting is a time of judgment.

We don’t like to hear the word ‘judgment’, do we? It frightens us, it makes us immediately assume that we are going to be found wanting on that day of judgment. And if it frightens us in the church, who believe fully that Christ has cleared away our sins, how much more does the word ‘judgment’ frighten people outside the church? Both inside and outside the church people are so uncomfortable with the idea of judgment that we not only don’t talk about it, we have developed some serious and seriously flawed ways to avoid thinking about judgment.

Back in the 1960’s, a movement started that was quickly adopted by educators and parents alike. At the heart of that movement was a deliberate intention that a child, especially a very young child in the early formative years, should never be told ‘No’. There was a feeling that a child hearing ‘No’ would be unduly negatively affected by that experience, and would thus not be able to develop to his or her full potential as a result. Frankly, I still think it sounds as ludicrous now as it did then, no matter how much fancy talk it was wrapped in. And wrap it in fancy talk people did! The educators turned the concept into a full-blown program in which children were never told that their work was unacceptable, and as a consequence we now have two generations of people who can neither spell nor do arithmetic without a computer. Worse, however, is that there are now two new generations who are totally “me-centered”, and unfortunately they can now be found behind the wheels of large SUV’s, still chanting their new mantra of “you can’t tell me not to use that bus lane”, or “nobody can tell me not to park there”.

Along with this sense of ‘the rules don’t apply to me’ also arose an inability or unwillingness to accept responsibility for their own actions. “It’s not my fault!”, is the cry, or perhaps it takes the form of “somebody else made me do it”. Either way, there are huge numbers of people who refuse to accept any responsibility for their own actions.

To his listeners, to the generations today who cannot take ‘no’ for an answer, to all those who refuse to be responsible for their own actions, and yes, even to us, Jesus presents a picture of how it will all wrap up some day, on the Day of the Lord, a new day in a new world. On that day “all the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd

separates the sheep from the goats ...” A clear picture of judging and separating those who would sit in the blessed position at his right hand in the kingdom from those who are sent away into the eternal fire. It is no wonder that people shy away from hearing about judgment, for it presents the very real possibility of winding up among the goats, and we can’t bear to think about that possibility for our destiny. But we must think about it, because the very existence of a final day of judgment is what provides meaning for our own lives. If there was no final day of reckoning for how we have lived out our lives, then it wouldn’t matter whether we showed kindness or cruelty, selflessness or selfishness, caring or disregard for others. Without the heavy responsibility of some day having to present ourselves before the Lord to be judged, we could do whatever we wanted, we could be as “me-centered” as any spoiled child, we could do as much damage and harm to other people as pleased us, and it wouldn’t matter.

But as uncomfortable as it may be to think about it, Jesus declares there will be a new day in the kingdom of God, a day upon which we will have to stand and account for ourselves, when we will have to defend how we have lived our lives, and that terrifies us. We know how far short we fall from perfection, how impossible it is for us to live our lives without falling afoul of at least some of the laws and rules and commandments we think form the basis for that judgment.

So what did Jesus say was the basis for that judgment? Are we to be judged on our purity of thought? Will we be separated from one another based on how often we attend church, on how pious we act? Is the basis for whether we are included with the sheep or excluded with the goats how often we read our bible, or how hard we prayed? None of the above. With his usual surprise, Jesus tells us that we will be judged on how much love for him we have in our hearts – and how we show that love. What a day of surprises that will be, Jesus tells us. There will be many who are surprised that the love they showed to Jesus through acts of kindness towards strangers, foreigners, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the prisoners, the downtrodden and the oppressed and the powerless, that the love they showed to the least of these provided the token to sit at his right hand. There will be many who are surprised that even with their self-importance, even with their acts of piety, they never lived out a love for Jesus through kindness to the least of his people, and find themselves banished. There will be many who will be astounded that their history of shunning and excluding others who seemed ‘un-Christian’ will be the very thing that causes them to get a card that says, “Goat”. Can’t you just picture the scene, with many old goats being shuffled along, protesting, “but, but, there must be some mistake ... I’m supposed to be in the other line! Can you hear the righteous indignation of others protesting that they had prophesied, had cast out demons and had performed miracles, and that they surely had earned a right to be in the other line, protesting so loudly that they still could not hear the soft voice of the Lamb upon the Throne saying sadly, “I knew you not”?

But set against their surprise is the more tender picture of those who are surprised to find themselves welcomed into the line headed for the place of honour. It’s a beautiful portrait of those saints whose service to others is so much a part of their behaviour that they are embarrassed at the recital of their deeds and amazed that service to those in need is service to Christ. Saints who are surprised to be reminded what could be more religious than attending to those who need care. Like so much of our faith the concept is simple, too simple to be accepted and believed, and thus too difficult to put into practice. So simple that we feel compelled to add layers of artificial behaviour, until the basic concept is finally lost amid the glitter. This final instruction from Jesus is meant as a chisel to chip away all those accretions and reveal once again the foundational message of God’s love and compassion, of his call to live our lives demonstrating in constant daily routine actions that same love for others.

There will be many other surprises on that day as well. As “all the nations” are assembled before the Son of Man, there will be many surprised that the gathering will include not just the church people, and not just people from one nation, but people from all nations, all walks of life, no longer classified as Jew or Greek (or Korean or First Nations), no longer identified as rich or poor, male or female, young or old. What will be most important on that day, the factor that determines whether one goes to the left or to the right at that moment of judgment will be whether or not you have lived the one ultimate commandment, “that you have loved one another as I have loved you”. Not spectacular deeds, not righteousness shining forth in acts of churchy-ness and piety, but in the simple, human and humane acts of kindness that display the same love God has for us and has shown us in Christ: simple acts of kindness like food for the hungry, water for the thirsty, comfort for the grieving and sick, clothing for the naked. All acts of kindness and mercy, the very substance of the grace of God, and the fulfillment of his command to love one another.

A word of caution is in order here, however. In the same way that we rush to add complexity to simple gospel messages, there is a danger here of taking this message and turning it into a formula for salvation, for example saying, “from now on every time I see a person alone or in prison or hungry or thirsty I will not see that person but I will see Christ”. This kind of behaviour would render every needy person faceless and nameless by those joyfully “serving Christ”, and would utterly ignore Christ’s call to a selfless motivation of loving and serving people. Both our actions and our underlying attitudes will form the basis for the judgment on that fateful day.

The start of a new year was almost always associated with judgment in old Judaism. It was seen as an appropriate time to look back on how one had lived the past year, to reflect upon one’s shortcomings and sins, and to make amends. The start of a New Year is still an appropriate time to look back on the past year, to see how the way we have lived fits with the lifestyle to which we are called, and to formulate plans and make resolutions for the coming year. It is a time to recognize that our days are numbered, that there is meaning in our lives, that there is a way that Christ calls us to live. What better time than New Year’s to honestly, in the comfort of God’s grace and forgiveness in Christ, look back at the past year and say, “oops!”. What better time than today to look forward, to fill your heart with God’s love and forgiveness and kindness and mercy, to fill your heart so full that it slops over onto everyone you meet, and spills onto them the same kindness, shown in acts of loving compassion. With the promise of a new day, the day of the Lord, we can greet the promise of this New Year with our joy of being accepted by God in Christ, and pass on that same message of joy in acts of kindness and mercy the whole year through, and in doing so will discover a new life, life rich with joy and fulfillment beyond our wildest dreams and expectations. A new life that will lead us some day to hear, “come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”.

All praise and glory be to the Father, who in his mercy has given us new life through his Son, Jesus Christ, and who enables us to live that life through the power of his Holy Spirit, One God.