

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

Judgement is something people have radically different opinions about. Some would say we have no right to judge anyone. Everyone should be allowed to be what they are without criticism and without sanction. Even legal judgement should be restricted to those cases where it is inescapable, and even then the purpose of judgement should be the reformation of the person judged. Others take the polar opposite point of view. They would say society is in its current mess because of a lack of judgement, and that the answer is to judge more frequently and more strictly. We need to be clear where the boundaries are, and those who transgress those boundaries should be punished to teach them a lesson, otherwise they will continue pushing back the boundaries to the point where absolutely anything goes. In terms of the Christian faith, the judgement of God is a topic largely ignored. This is partly because an earlier age overdid the subject, with terrifying sermons about the Last Judgement and the horrors of hell. But it is also because we cannot bear to think about our loving heavenly Father condemning people. After all, Jesus told us to turn the other cheek, didn't he, and said we should not judge our fellow man. So how can he judge? What is the Bible's line on judgement. Actually, it is stronger than we may think. Even the most scholarly academic minds cannot deny that Jesus talked about judgement. We may prefer to think he just spoke comfortable platitudes, and never judged anyone, but no serious literary or historical study can deny that Jesus taught that there would be a divine judgement. Whatever else Jesus said or did not say, he certainly said that. He tells his followers not to judge, because that is not their place. But the whole point is that judgement is to be left to God, because it is *his* job. He can judge, because he knows what is in men's hearts, and he has all wisdom. Human beings should not, because they are more likely to get things wrong. The Bible speaks of two types of judgement:

1. Judgement Now

The writer of the Fourth Gospel says: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son." (John 3: 19-20) This is judgement *now*. All people are judged on their response to Jesus. If we believe, we are saved. But if we refuse to believe (we are talking here about a conscious decision not to believe), we condemn ourselves, because we turn our eyes away from the truth. The same truth is put more positively by Jesus, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." (John 5: 24) Those who do believe in Jesus have nothing to fear, and nothing to answer for at the Last Judgement. Because they believe, they have already been declared "not guilty", and have already passed from the realm of death to the realm of life. This is what that confusing statement in the First Letter of John that "perfect love casts out fear" really means. The full quotation is: "In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." (1 John 4: 17-18) "Perfect love" describes the believers close personal relationship with God through Jesus. If we have such a relationship, says John, we will not fear the day of judgement. Because we know the love God has for us, we know we will be declared "not guilty", and so we have

nothing to fear. But in the last clause, John suggests that a person who does not have that assurance, does not live in that loving relationship with God, because one does not fear a person one loves. Do we accept Jesus as God's Son, as the Lord and master of our lives, as our Saviour and our Friend. If we do, we are saved (that is, we will be acquitted at the Last Judgement): if we do not, we are condemned already, out of our own mouths.

2. Judgement to come

But that is not all there is to judgement. It would be nice and comforting to believe all this talk of "judgement" in the New Testament was just a graphic way of describing the challenge Jesus presents us with in our daily lives. Many have sought to interpret the Bible that way. But however comforting that idea may be, it does not adequately explain all the Bible says about Judgement. There remain some uncomfortable passages which are not easily interpreted in the way. All the gospels record teaching given by Jesus about a time when he would return, accompanied by portentous events in the sky and on earth, to judge the living and the dead (see especially Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21). Also, what we have just said about Jesus judging people *now* presupposes a more final judgement in the future. The passage we quoted from the First Letter of John speaks of "having confidence on the *day of judgement*". And shortly after saying that those who believe in him have already crossed from death to life, Jesus says: "a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done good will rise to live, and those who have done evil will rise to be condemned." Jesus only confronts us with a choice *now* because there is a reckoning to be made *in the future*. We may like to think that people would be so attracted by the wonder and power of Jesus' love, that they would *want* to follow him without the need of any threats. But all we know of human nature tells us every one gets away with anything they can get away with. If there were no sanction against evil-doing (either in terms of punishment or in terms of natural consequences), few of us would live moral lives. No state in the world can survive without a criminal justice system to punish offenders. Why should we believe the universe could be run without some sort of eternal Court of Justice? Too often in our thinking about God, we concentrate on our favourite image of God to the exclusion of all other images. But God is too great to be summed up by any one image. It is only by working with a number of images, side by side, that we can even approach understanding what God is like. Our age tends to over-emphasize the picture of God as Father (particularly dangerous in an age such as ours, where parents tend to be more indulgent than has historically been the case. We conveniently forget that when Jesus used the word "Father", the term had very different resonances than it does today.), and to forget the equally important image of God as King. Monarchs are not "in" today. They appear oppressive and undemocratic to modern eyes. Certainly to put any one human being in such a position is to invite trouble, but in terms of the universe, who else but God can act as Ruler and Judge. Who has sufficient wisdom, insight, and knowledge to sit alongside him? And if our Father is also our King, he cannot just "turn the other cheek" for ever. Commands such as "judge not that you be not judged" are fine when applied to personal relationships, but utterly unrealistic when applied to the running of a state, a world, or a universe. In such cases, there has to be judgement, there has to be a final reckoning. Otherwise, everyone just does what is right in their own eyes and moral anarchy prevails. God provides everyone with as many second, third, and fourth chances as they need. The Second Letter of Peter says: "The Lord is not slow

in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”(2 Peter 3: 9) Anyone who has even the slightest desire to turn to Christ will be given every chance they need. But there has to be a reckoning some time. Some time God has got to step in and call a halt. In the next verse, the same author repeats Jesus’ words that “the day of the Lord will come like a thief”. And come it must, bringing with it the condemnation of all who have rejected Christ and willfully ignored God, and the salvation and reception into God’s heavenly home those who believe in Christ and faithfully follow him.

What of those in between, who do not fit into either of these well-defined categories? They are what the Day of Judgement is all about. Those who believe are acquitted already. Those who reject Christ are already condemned. The decisions taken will relate to the “in-betweens”: those who never heard, those who heard the message but were prevented from receiving it by all the cultural baggage that went along with it, children who died before they could make any conscious decision, etc., etc... What does Scripture say of these? Very little. Jesus tells a parable of the Last Judgement (Matthew 25: 31-46), which could be taken to suggest that these people would be judged according to whether they welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, fed the hungry, visited those in prison, etc. Paul has some words in his Letter to the Romans which have some bearing on this issue. He says: “Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.” This is a difficult passage to interpret, but it appears to suggest that Gentiles, who were not God’s people and did not know the Law of Moses, could be accepted by God if they did naturally the things the Law spoke of, even though they did so unwittingly. As long as they lived the way God wants people to live, it would appear God would accept them, despite their ignorance of his revealed will. This could imply that those who have never heard the message of Jesus could be saved through Him, if they naturally do what God wants them to do and fall in line with His will. Maybe the test will be, how did these people respond to the light they *did* receive. But all this is speculation. The Bible does not tell us what will become of other people. That is God’s business, not ours. We have heard. What is our response?

NOTE ON HEAVEN AND HELL

About life the other side of the Last Judgement the Bible tells us very little. It is doubtful whether we on this side of the event could even begin to conceive of what that life might be like. Some of these issues will be covered in “The Resurrection of the Body”, but there will be other issues – especially relating to the fate of the condemned (or “damned”, which historically meant the same thing), which probably ought to be addressed here.

Heaven is in a different dimension. It is outside space and time as we know it. It is likely that heaven and hell are all around us, but invisible to us. Questions such as, “How can there be enough space for all the bodies?” miss the point. The kind of spiritual bodies which people will have in that context (see “The Resurrection of the Body”) will not need discrete space. Bodies will have totally different properties. And if heaven is outside time, it *could* be around us now, but unseen. So the fervent

questions of the bereaved “Is Auntie Jean in heaven now?”, or “Can Auntie Jean see us now, from heaven”, may not be so off-beam. If heaven is outside time, we enter the Last Judgement when we die, and we enter heaven immediately. But if heaven is outside time, it can be said to exist alongside us now. And while we cannot see into heaven, it is possible that those in heaven (who possess so many more possibilities than us) *may* be able to see us. That must remain speculation, of course. No one can know for certain until they cross the divide of death for themselves.

And what about hell and the fiery torments? The New Testament word for “hell” is Gehenna. This is a Greek form of the Hebrew word Ge-Hinnom, or “Valley of Hinnom”. It is a real valley, outside the walls of Jerusalem. In a sense, if you want to see Hell, take a tour of Jerusalem and ask the tour guide to point out the Valley of Hinnom. It looks quite innocuous today. But in Jesus’ day, it was used as the city rubbish tip. There was always a fire going, and among the other rubbish the Romans burned the bodies of crucified criminals. The valley had been used for human sacrifices in Old Testament times, so it was under a religious curse. It is immediately obvious where the Biblical imagery of hell “where the devouring worm never dies and the fire is not quenched” (Jesus’ words from Mark 9: 48), and the “lake of fire” (Revelation 20). But whenever the Bible speaks about the after-life, it speaks in picture language. It is likely that these pictures are intended to convey only an impression of a place you do *not* want to go to.

Will there be eternal torture? Mark 9 does not suggest so. Revelation 20 does. But whichever picture you run with, it is still a picture. It remains a strong possibility that Hell will be no more than Earth with God and the good people taken out of it. Human beings, unhampered by the restraining influence of God’s Holy Spirit and good people, are more than capable of constructing their own Hell, and inflicting torture on themselves. And if this sounds a softer option than the “lake of fire”, think again. Remember, in the light of our discussion above, we are not only talking of a world without Christians, but also without all those good people who have not got round to acknowledge Christ, and a world where the dark forces have free play-unhindered by the forces of light. Again all this is speculation. The Bible does not tell us. All it does say is we will not like Hell, and we should take the one step necessary to avoid it – commit our lives to Christ.