

On “Judgement”
The Third Sunday in Advent
(From the Epistle: *1 Corinthians 4:1-5*)

LET a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgement: yea, I judge not mine own self. For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified; but he that judgeth me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts; and then shall every man have praise of God.

Today's Epistle drops us right into the midst of an intensely personal letter the Apostle is writing to the Corinthian church. The two Corinthian Epistles are remarkable in part because of how freely and unashamedly St. Paul bears his heart and soul to his spiritual children, the offspring of his earlier missionary work. He displays a transparency and humility that very few great leaders would ever dare allow with a constituency. In thus exposing himself, he greatly risks the possibility of their disrespect and scorn. If we were to study these letters, we would see that the Corinthians have indeed taken advantage of Paul's candor. They have called his authenticity into question, and allowed other leaders to assert themselves over the Apostle. It is here where the topic of “judgment” comes to the fore.

Surely this is an eminently appropriate subject for Advent. It appears, of course, in a number of the seasonal readings. Here on earth, we wait, as it were, in a great state of irresolution. We are awash in a sea of opinions. Every issue has a multitude of convincing arguments on either side, and we are often at a tremendous loss in arriving at conclusions that satisfy us. Deference is invariably paid to education and intelligence by a world desperately seeking reliable determinations for the host of difficult, unanswerable things that confront us. But Advent provides both a blessed hope and a stern warning: the Judge Himself will appear to render a final and irreversible verdict to every controversy, every question, that has defied adequate resolution. The frustrating tyranny of indecision and uncertainty will end. The arbitrary will finally give way to the absolute.

Until that time, we should admire the Apostle's example. He never “pulls rank”, demanding respect and submission on the basis of his apostleship. He pleads with the Corinthians. He reasons with them, and appeals to them. He wants to afford them every possibility to reach mature conclusions on their own, in a reasonable way, without compulsion. He affords them every available and possible benefit of the doubt. He deals with them as if they already were the kind of people he precisely hopes, with all of his heart, they will someday become. This is true leadership: dangerously, riskily entrusting oneself to the good graces of those within our charge for whom we have the highest expectations. By paying those we lead such an almost absurdly high

compliment, we give them every opportunity to rise to the very level we envision for them. It is also the stuff of love, the sort of love that Paul will so eloquently define for his Corinthian readers within a few short pages, a love that *beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things* (1 Cor. 13:7). It is the manner in which Jesus dealt with His disciples. It is the way our Heavenly Father treats us.

How can the apostle dare to approach his spiritual flock this way? It is because of his absolute and unshakeable conviction in what he knows will be the outcome of all the affairs of men. Because he is sure that there will an ultimate, final Assize, when all good and righteous and noble actions will be exposed and vindicated, he can surrender every impulse rush to his own defense, knowing that his intentions all along were the best, even if not perfect.

But did his faith in Judgment Day shield him from present hurt and heartbreak? Was he terribly misunderstood, in spite of his certainty? Was he vastly under-appreciated? Was he even slandered and maligned? Were his purposes misconstrued? Yes, certainly, all of this, and much more (see, for example, 2 Corinthians chapters 10-13). We can feel his anguish in his words, throughout these epistles. But with a steady voice, and with supernatural calm and assurance, he reminds the unruly Corinthian believers that all unreasonable and unfair judgment should be suspended *until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts; and then shall every man have praise of God* (vs. 5).

These portentous words bear either promise, or dread, depending upon the status quo of the hearer. For those, like Paul, who have endeavored to live within the light of good conscience, measuring every attitude and action by the standards clearly put forth in God's Word, living always, as it were, consciously under divine scrutiny, there can be an earnest hope and expectation of vindication. Some day all will be convinced that his intentions were the best, and that the inner motives of his heart were pure and sincere and blameless. But for the opposing camp --his critics and naysayers-- those whose agendas were driven by selfishness, or personal aggrandizement, or fame and fortune, regardless of how artfully and successfully it was hidden and disguised, such a fearful occasion for ultimate exposure means discovery, shame, embarrassment, and condemnation.

How is it for you? For me? Do we ever share in Paul's experience of being subject to the unkind and hasty judgment of others, turning the good we have sought to do into something bad? Have our efforts to explain and justify our motives ever been met with disinterest, and even dismissed? Are we ourselves tempted to jump to conclusions about why others take actions we can neither understand nor approve?

May God help us to adopt the Apostle's attitude. We must be careful in our assessment of others. And to the end that we try to keep our good works discreetly invisible, minimize attention

to any virtues and saintliness we may possess, deliberately deflect any focus on ourselves and our accomplishments, refuse to pray on street-corners or give alms to the sound of a trumpet fanfare (Matthew 6:2,5), we vastly brighten and magnify for ourselves that eventual time of disclosure to which every human soul is destined.

But we impoverish our souls by every effort we make toward self-promotion. Though we may gain and keep the praise of men, we forfeit the greatest treasure man can possess... the *praise of God* (vs. 5b).

Let us pray:

O Lord God, Father Almighty, purify the secrets of our hearts, and mercifully wash out all the stains of sins; and grant, O Lord, that being cleansed from our crimes by the benediction of Thy tenderness, we may without terror await the fearful and terrible Coming of Jesus Christ our Lord...in whose Name we pray. Amen. (from Ancient Collects & Other Prayers...)