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JUDGMENT

Jesus in St Matthew's gospel (Mt 25:31-46), describes how he will judge who of us are worthwhile, on the basis of what we have done to him in one another.

The basic outlines are taken from Ezekiel, where the Shepherd-King judges “between sheep and sheep, between rams and he-goats” (Ez 34:17). His judgment will not take exceptional works into account, such as prophesying, casting out demons, or working miracles (Mt 7:22-23), but he will acknowledge the works of mercy.

Matthew lists these works, first positively, following Isaiah: “to share your bread with the hungry, and shelter the homeless poor, to clothe the man you see to be naked” (Is 58:7), then negatively, following Job: “men go naked now through your despoiling; you have begrudged water to the thirsty man, and refused bread to the hungry” (Jb 22:6-7).

Matthew may have taken his cue also from Sirach (Ecclesiasticus): “Stretch your hand out also to the poor man ...Share the grief of the grief-stricken. Do not shrink from visiting the sick” (Sir 7:35-36).

Jesus, the Saviour, is everyone's Judge. He judges us all by our charity. Those also who have never known Jesus Christ can make contact with him, because, by the fact that they were born human, they have their likeness in Jesus, being created in his image. Whether they know it or not, their every act of love is directed at Christ, since Jesus identifies with everyone as his brother or sister.

When we recognize the Old Testament background of Matthew's judgment scene, we are not inclined to take it as a literal preview of the future day of the Last Judgment. Rather, we are obliged to live from moment to moment in view of our meeting with Jesus Christ, who presents himself to us in the poor here and now.

We are reminded of the final coming of Christ the Judge. But we are more strongly reminded of his presence here and now in people that demands of us an effort to serve him in our fellows. Our relations with Jesus are the same as our relations with living men and women. Our attitude towards others is a startling revelation of the sincerity of our love for God.

It turns out that we judge ourselves. We are judging ourselves here and now. Or put it another way. Jesus identifies with the least of our brothers. The least of our brothers is our judge. Our judgment depends on what we do to the least of our brothers and sisters.

I am painfully reminded of this when, through fear or embarrassment, I avoid the beggars who confront me, simply by their presence, at the front door or in the street. Some

are importunate, very few are insulting, but all are Jesus Christ "alive", and they are my unwitting judges.

Our actions today are decisive for all time and beyond time. Our present actions have future lasting consequences for ourselves and others. Above all, there is no substitute for active love of our fellows, now, because our action is taken as done to Jesus Christ himself.

The stress of Matthew's gospel is on here and now. All our opportunities to love and serve Jesus Christ are now. We bring down a judgment on ourselves now. Never mind about the Last Judgment at the end of time. Our Judgment is going on now. Take care of it now.

Christ the Judge makes it very clear that he cares for mankind through our efforts. He will judge us according to our efforts in favour of our fellows, or our neglect of them.

The surprise of those who are condemned indicates that they never identified their duty to God with their duty to others. Jesus stresses the point that we don't love God if we don't love one another. Love is the urge to spend ourselves for the good of another. Christian love spends itself for the good of any other person especially the poorly-off, the miserable, the least.

Imagine a whole crowd of people who haven't put a foot wrong in their lives. They're waiting outside the gates of heaven, sure of their booked seats inside. Suddenly, an incredible rumour spreads around: "He's going to forgive the others as well!" They're astonished and indignant. They protest: "It's not fair!" They bemoan their efforts and self-denials "Why didn't we use the pill like everybody else? They have no right to come in." At that moment, they're judged and damned.

Take a good look at the person sitting next to you. Jesus says "That's me. Are you looking for me somewhere in the future? I have come already, and I am present to you, especially in the person of the poor and unfortunate. I am the least of your fellows and I am your Judge. You ignore me at your own risk."

"Are you anxious about Judgment Day? How you are all going to fit into that valley of Jehoshaphat? You are pronouncing your own judgment on yourself, this very day.

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