Sermon for the Second Sunday in Advent
7 December 2025

We have some interesting images from the Gospel to consider today. The first is the prophets, and the act of prophecy, and the second is a judge, and the act of judgement. The image of the prophet is firmly seen in John the Baptist, and the image of the Judge is found within the depiction of Jesus in the Gospel.

John the Baptist is in the wilderness, calling for people to repent. He proclaims to the people, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' Isaiah foretells of John's work, the one who will point the way to Jesus. The description of John makes him seem rather wild, wearing camel's hair clothing and eating locusts and wild honey, yet the people are drawn to him. They come to him to hear him speak and to be baptised by him. They confess their sins to him in an act of repentance, acting on his words.

And then a group come to him who he was probably not expecting. The Pharisees and Sadducees come to him, also seeking baptism, and he has words of warning for them. In addition to calling them a brood of vipers, he says some constructive things to them: First is an instruction, "Bear fruit worthy of repentance". He calls them to examine themselves and genuinely seek the forgiveness of God.

He reminds them that they are not saved through their obedience to the law and to religious tradition. Their link to Abraham will not redeem them. What will save them is their turning to God and connecting to the grace, love and wisdom of God, through Jesus who is destined to come.

For John, this news is critically important. There is a sense of imminence, and even urgency. He says, "Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees", implying that the time of judgement is coming, and so is the judge.

Then he begins to speak about Jesus, but he does not name him. Jesus is the one who is more powerful than John, and John declares himself unworthy to even carry his sandals. John baptised people with water for cleansing, but Jesus will baptise people in a different way – with the Holy Spirit. This is a baptism that will connect us to God deeply and profoundly, not just cleanse us from our sins.

John ends by describing Jesus as carrying a winnowing-fork, and judging between the wheat and the chaff. And so we move from the image of John as a Prophet to Jesus as judge. He is coming among us to render God's judgement. So, in this season where we look for Jesus' coming among us, and anticipate all that he will do to redeem humanity, how might we respond to the depiction of Jesus as our impending judge?

First might be a sense of fear. It is natural for us to be somewhat anxious around someone who we feel has power and authority over us. Especially when we hear what will happen to those who will be found wanting. In the Gospel, the chaff is burned "with unquenchable fire", and Jesus is one who will clear the threshing floor. He will diligently go through the wheat and chaff, gathering what is valuable, and feeding what is discarded to the flames.

There is also the sense that there is nowhere to hide, and no way we can hide. Jesus is God incarnate, so we cannot escape being totally honest with him and in front of him. As a judge, he's one who knows us through and through, and there's no chance of pulling the wool over his eyes. No wonder there might be a sense of dread at the thought of his coming.

But … that's not taking something significant into account. His humanity. Jesus is fully human and fully divine. He experienced it all – the highs and lows of existence, and he understands the complexity of the human experience.

So as a judge, he brings his empathy and compassion to his task. Any judgement we face is one which is made from a position of grace and mercy. And this is a wonderful blessing – and the reason why we need not fear the idea of Christ being our judge, or the notion of his coming to judge humanity. We are indeed flawed – that's part of the human condition – and we need to accept responsibility for all that we do and say, but our flaws will be treated with understanding, not condemnation.

This is why we have such a comforting image within the words of the Prophet Isaiah when it speaks about the one who comes, that 'shoot of the stock of Jesse'. The prophet says, "He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth". This speaks to Jesus' empathy and compassion, and his willingness to be merciful to those he encountered. This judge is no fool, and knows how to use their power justly and rightly, in order that people might grow and flourish.

When we hear these passages, and encounter the image of Jesus as judge, may we be comforted and encouraged, rather than feel punished or condemned. May we know that when we encounter divine judgement, we will be treated with compassion. We need to honestly acknowledge our faults, but we will also be given the chance to receive redemption and forgiveness in response. This is the nature of God's love, and Jesus' coming among us was to ensure that we understood both the importance of being reconciled to God, and the depth of God's infinite love for us.

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