

SERMON: “Words of Hope: *I Believe in Jesus Christ who sits on the right hand of God*”

Rev. Geoff Ross. Sunday, March 19, 2017. St. Andrew’s, Brampton.

[Calvin & Hobbes cartoon: “Do you believe in God?” “Well, Somebody’s out to get me”] The second statement of the Creed covers the life of Jesus, from birth to ascension. Last week we looked at the ‘first half’ – the birth half – and dealt with the historical reality of Jesus, this week we move quickly through Jesus’ ministry, His arrest, trial, death, and His resurrection (Holy Week) to focus on the last phrase of the Statement; *“He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father, and He will come to judge the living and the dead.”* A simple way of looking at the litany of affirmations is to see them as being rooted in a past reality Jesus was born, He lived, He did suffer and die, Jesus did rise from the dead, and He did ascend back to heaven. Each event was witnessed – and recorded, as we heard last week. But the last phrase of the ‘Jesus Statement’ looks forward into the future toward a final, future event and action.

[Open Bibles to Matt 25:31-43 – p. 807] The truth is we have become somewhat ambivalent about the “end times;” we’ve become numb to what the Bible actually says will happen: that all of creation will be judged as God re-creates the world anew. And it’s understandable; what was thought to be immanent 2000 years has lost most of its punch today. But, as I’ve said over the past two weeks, while the Apostles’ Creed isn’t in the Bible it is Biblical, coming directly from both scripture and Jesus’/Apostles’ teachings; and this goes for this phrase too! Rather than being a response to a past truth (a promise fulfilled) this future statement is our affirming our belief/confidence/hope in the fulfillment of our promised salvation; Jesus’ return/judgment restores God’s creation making the story of God’s saving plan – the *“mission Dei”*/mission of God – complete.

The idea of God judging the world is an important Old Testament theme; God *“will judge the world in righteousness and His people in faithfulness.”* (Ps 96:13) God’s faithfulness is connected to His promise/power to rule/judge/‘put everything right’ in a world gone ‘wrong.’ This is the hope that, when the time comes, God will reset all that is wrong/broken/fallen in this world re-creating the harmony/balance/shalom it was meant to have. This is the hope that sustained the people of God in exile and slavery; it is the hope that for Christians is based on Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself says to His disciples, *“When the Son of Man comes in His glory and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne.”* (Matt 25:31) Not just to reign, but to judge; that’s what *‘sitting on the right hand of God’* means.

What’s interesting is how many people will full-heartedly profess the first half of this statement – ready to embrace the ‘baby Jesus’ – but seem to run out of breath when it comes to professing their belief/willingness in submitting to the same “Lord” now that He’s in a position to ‘judge the living and the dead.’ But this is what we believe – and have since the beginning, as Paul’s use of an early Christian hymn that speaks of Jesus as the divine judge shows; *“at the name of Jesus every knee should bend/bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth...”* (Phil 2:10) Friends, Jesus will come again, and

everybody/everything will bow and submit itself to His judgment.

The good news is, judgment isn't in itself bad – but it is still cause for concern: Jesus will come to sift/separate/divide the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats, the good from the bad – seeking what is helpful/productive/faithful/obedient for/to the Kingdom of God and what wasn't. But how does one become helpful/productive/faithful/obedient for/to the Kingdom of God? Simple; Jesus, in the Gospel of Mark says that we are to “*repent and believe in the good news.*” (Mk 1:15) In other words, we are to acknowledge/seek forgiveness for our sins and live out our lives in response to God's offer of salvation. Second, Jesus is the judge, and the criteria for His judgment are His teachings – as we heard in today's reading, His knowledge of our following His teachings, and our relationship with Him. But this shouldn't be a surprise.

Over and over Jesus taught that we would be held to account (Matthew 24-25); the warning about the end times, the coming of the Son of Man, the lesson of the fig tree, the explicit call for watchfulness, the parables of the two servants, the ten virgins, of the talents, ending with the “judgment of the Nations” – the message is clear; we need to be ready! But we need to be more than just prepared; we need to live lives in response to our salvation, lives lived faithfully, obediently, actively engaged in the transforming the world from our insides out. [Deeds] Yes, Jesus is coming again, and He will judge us by how busy we are – aware of our faults/failings but repentant, hopeful, expectant that since Jesus died for us that we are to live for Him, to live lives of faith and faithfulness.

When we stand a say we believe that Jesus is coming again – and that He will judge the living and the dead – we say this not in fear, but in faith, a faith based on the love of God known in and through the One God appointed/sent to be-with us, the One who lived with us, who died for us, who God raised from the dead to reconcile our sins/release us from death, who now sits with God to act/intercede on our behalf; [Pardon] Friends, Jesus loves us, Jesus as Christ saves us. This is our belief; by saying it in the Apostles' Creed we proclaim it to be our hope. Amen.

[Deeds] A quick look at the parable of the Last Judgment (Matt 25:31-42) and the answer is pretty clear; the criteria for salvation are compassion – initiated first by simply noticing the needs of others, followed by action – specifically action in direct response to the need. “*I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty/gave me a drink, homeless/gave me a home, naked/gave me clothes, sick/imprisoned and you came to me.*” The model of the parable is what Jesus did for us through the incarnation – He came to us, fed us, gave us living water, prepared a place for us.... The challenge of the parable is whether we can live up to our commission to be-like Christ by loving those around us as Jesus came to love us. But I want to be clear, as C.S. Lewis wrote about this parable; “*This parable is not teaching salvation by good deeds, but **evidence of salvation through good deeds.***”

[Pardon] Just over 3 years ago one of the clients came to me with a personal request – one that they were somewhat embarrassed about. We met in my office and over the next

hour they told me a story that went all the way back about a decade and their home country in Africa. I hear a lot of stories – and, trust me, most of them are exaggerated to try to get me to give them money; but this story was different. Caught between a past life and their desire for a new one; the person was asking for help; they needed both a letter and money to facilitate a Federal pardon process to remove blot on their record from a lifetime ago. On behalf of St. Andrew's, I agreed to help. A letter was written; the fee was paid. This week, as the Food Bank wound down, I was called back downstairs to meet with someone; it was my 'friend:' they had news. With tears in their eyes they told me, "God is so Good! I've been pardoned!" We both said; "Praise God!" Then I heard that because of this "forgiveness" the plan is to finish their university degree, and "live free from shame." Together we celebrated – standing there in the hallway – and we said a prayer of thanksgiving.