

## The Last Things

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Christ the King Sunday, November 25, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Matthew 25:31-46.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

Today's the last Sunday in the Church year. Next week a new Church year begins with the first Sunday in Advent. And on this last Sunday of the year the Church directs us to think about the Return of Christ, the Last Judgment, Heaven and Hell. These are subjects we don't hear much about in the Presbyterian Church. We don't want to be associated with hell-fire and brimstone preaching and wild-eyed speculations about the Return of Christ. We pride ourselves that we have a faith that uses reason rather than fear to win people to Christ. Nevertheless, I want to talk about what the Church calls the Last Things in the next 20 minutes. I want to persuade you of the reality of these things so that our lives will take on another dimension, the dimension of eternity.

First, I believe in the Return of Christ. "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory." Jesus came the first time as a homeless baby born in a stable. "The Son of Man has no place to lay his head", he once said. He fasted in the wilderness and was hungry. He was imprisoned near the end of his life. And on the cross he was naked and thirsty. But the Church has taught, and I believe, that he'll come again in glory. Don't ask me for details. I don't pretend to know the details.

When the Church confesses that Christ will come again we're confessing that history has a purpose and a goal. History won't just go on and on. It's a story with a beginning, a middle, and an ending. I was thinking of this last week when I was watching some of the football games. Imagine playing

football without any goals. Up and down the field the teams go, sometimes gaining, sometimes losing yardage, but with no goal in sight and with no time limit. That would be meaningless and boring. But when Penn State is losing with eight minutes left in the final quarter the game gets pretty exciting. Just as football needs goals and a time limit to make the game interesting and meaningful, history needs a goal and a time limit to make it meaningful and purposeful.

Leslie Weatherhead, in his book, *The Christian Agnostic*, tells about an ocean voyage he once took. He stood on deck one night and meditated on what would happen if the captain summoned everybody on deck and said something like this: "There's plenty of food on board. Life will proceed as before. Meals will be served, games played, dances arranged, concerts provided, but I've decided not to make for a port. We'll just cruise round and round in the ocean until our fuel's exhausted and then I'll sink the ship." Weatherhead says, "The Captain's speech would have snatched from every mind the concept of purpose, meaning and goal." The Church's faith in the Return of Christ gives history a goal and a purpose.

And, second, I believe in the Last Judgment. Jesus said, "All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." Jesus teaches, here, that the Last Judgment will be made on the basis of our response to human need. It will be based, not on what we say we believe or what we say we're unable to believe, not on our religious experiences or our lack of religious experiences, but on how we've responded to human beings who are hungry, homeless, naked, sick, and imprisoned.

In the light of this Professor Shirley Guthrie asks, "Who of us, no matter how moral or pious, would not have to be counted among the wicked for our

failure to love God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves? But the whole picture changes as soon as we remember who the Judge will be. Not blind justice, not a vengeful or even unbiased judge, but Christ himself! The one who will judge sinful men and women is the very one who loved and gave his life for sinners! The triumphant Judge who stands at the end is none other than the dying man on a cross who has already taken the judgment of God on himself for the sake of the whole world" (Christian Doctrine).

Thirdly, I believe in Hell. I say this with great reluctance. Is it really possible that some day there will be some who will hear those awful words, "You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels"? I must confess that I, personally, have oftened feared hearing those words myself. As a teenager I had a terrible fear of hell sometimes. When I think of some of the things I did as a teenager my fears may well have been justified.

And I haven't completely outgrown those fears. Last March when the doctor told me I had cancer I thought I might be dead in a matter of months. I obviously didn't want to die and leave Kay, Andrew, Philip and Mark without a husband and father. I was anxious for them, but I was also anxious for myself, perhaps selfishly so. I feared that I might die and go to hell. The fear of hell was very fear for me. What if I die and go into the eternal fire? I had to keep coming back to the Gospel message that God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance and eternal life. I kept reminding myself that the Lord is my Shepherd... that the Good Shepherd gives his life for his sheep and that he has come down to earth in Jess to search out his lost sheep and will not give up until he's found them and brought them home.

I wrote to Ben Lacey Rose, the former editor of the Question and Answer column in the Presbyterian Survey. I asked him what he believed about hell. He wrote back, "I do indeed believe in hell. I have difficulty seeing how one can say that he believes in Jesus Christ or that he takes the New Testament seriously and yet does not believe in hell. Jesus talks more about the subject than anyone else in the New Testament...." He went on to say, however, "I believe that if, at any future time, those in hell would repent and turn to God, God would most assuredly forgive them-- but" he said, "there's no biblical evidence that any have ever done so." Further in the letter he wrote, "I agree with you also that God sends no one to hell; they go there, if they go, by their own choosing.... The electing grace of God has peopled heaven with a multitude which no one can number, but has not sent one soul to hell."

4. Finally, I believe in heaven. No Christian sermon can end on the note of hell. The Christian message is good news, not bad news. The good news is not that some may want finally to go to hell rather than to do God's will. The good news is that Christ's sheep will hear the Good Shepherd say, "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy Kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The Kingdom of God is where God's will is done. I long for that kingdom. I long for that day when I will want to do all that God wants me to do; when I will be all that God wants me to be. I long for that day when this world will be all that God wants it to be. I don't believe that it's all pie in the sky. I'm betting my life that God's kingdom will come to earth one day; the knowledge of God will cover the earth as the waters cover the seas; swords will be beaten into ploughshares and the nations will learn

war no more; God will live with us and we'll be his people. God will wipe every tear from our eyes and death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more and the Risen Christ has put all his enemies under his feet.

If you and I really believe this we won't simply wait for it to happen. We'll pray and work for it-- not, of course, in our own strength, but in the strength that comes from relying on the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray: Almighty and everlasting God, whose will it is to restore all things in your well-beloved Son, the King of kings and Lord of lords: Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy SPIrit, one GOD, now and forever. Amen.