

Coming of the Lord and Judgement

SERMON · Covenant and Doctrine · Not stated precisely; around November 2016 (the Reign of Christ, Christ the King Sunday)

Matthew 25:31-46 (the Sheep and the Goats)

Matthew 11:28 (quoted)

Luke 14:13 (quoted)

2 Peter 3:9-10 (quoted)

Isaiah 11:6-9 (quoted)

Luke 6:46 (quoted)

A woman dreamt of having a conversation with Jesus Christ. She began by complaining about so much poverty, misery, cruelty, sickness, and hatred in the world, and asked Jesus, “What have You done about it?” Jesus answered, “I created you.” Friends, the Gospel passage read to us, for that matter the entire twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew, is all about Jesus wanting each one of us to be walking, talking, living, and breathing sermons. He said, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28); He said, “But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind” (Luke 14:13); Peter tells us in the Book of Acts how Jesus “went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil” (Acts 10:38). Jesus taught us this very principle, He modelled this principle, He lived this principle, and He conducted His ministry in this way, because that was what God had always said He wanted His people to be. The Gospel passage, however, has two distinct but tightly dovetailed subjects for us to deliberate upon: the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and His Judgement. Today, the Church of South India wants us to meditate on this very theme, “Coming of the Lord and Judgement.” How much justice I can do to such an involved theme in twenty minutes, I do not know, but let me try.

First, I am not an end-time alarmist; rather, all of us need to be cheerful about the end time and the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. I, therefore, do not intend to scare the wits out of you by giving you the graphic details of all that the Bible tells us will happen on that day. Having said that, the caution is for us to be prepared for that day. It sounds oxymoronic to say that Christ's Second Coming is both imminent and delayed, two positions in direct contradiction. The belief that Christ's return is imminent is not new. His followers have been looking for His return right from the beginning. The disciples and the early Church believed that they were living in the last days, and that Christ could come at any time. Yes, my friends, Christ's return is imminent; it could happen at any moment. Yet Christ's return is also delayed. Over two thousand and fifteen years have come and gone, and we are still waiting for Him to return. Peter perhaps had the situation worked out for us when he said: “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not

willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (2 Peter 3:9-10). While Peter had no doubt about our Lord's coming and the events that would follow, we cannot but agree with him that our Lord is giving us time for repentance, and wants us to conduct ourselves in the manner He has taught us. The tension between these extremes is broken by the third reality of our Lord's Second Coming: Christ's return will be sudden. The Lord is immensely patient with us.

We also need not be particularly worried about the passing away of the world as we know it today. Jesus will take us to His New Creation, which will be quite different, offering us an eternal existence in glory and in His holy presence. Isaiah prophesied about the New Creation, though he used a great deal of imagery and symbolism, in Isaiah 11:6-9: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. And the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. And the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.” I want to be at such a place, don't you?

While we are waiting in expectation, we should love and glorify Jesus Christ. Jesus poses a question here; He asked, “And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46). He tells us how, in the beautiful and all-encompassing parable narrated in Matthew 25:34-36: “Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me.” The righteous were surprised and did not know when they did all that. He then tells them, “Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matthew 25:40). This parable describes acts of mercy we all can do every day. These acts do not depend on wealth, ability, or intelligence; they are simple acts freely given and freely received. We have no excuse to neglect those who have deep needs, and we cannot hand over this responsibility to the Church or government.

Jesus demands our personal involvement in caring for others' needs. This is the only way we can express our love and obedience to Jesus, and truly glorify Him.

The point of this parable is the importance of serving where service is needed. The focus of this parable is that we should love every person and serve anyone we can. Such love for others glorifies Jesus by reflecting our love for Him. A few weeks ago, we deliberated on the subject of all believers being priests. The lesson fits very well here. As priests, we are expected to serve, and not be served. If you recall the introduction today, the yardstick of our righteousness is not in the politeness you show to the preacher of the day by listening to the sermon patiently, but in the living of the sermon, so that our life will reflect Jesus Christ.

As to the question of who are the sheep in this passage, some say they are some of the people who survived the tribulation. Some say all people who have ever lived, since all will be resurrected at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. On that day, Jesus separates the sheep from the goats, and the plight of the goats we cannot even imagine. They receive eternal punishment in hell, the place of punishment after death for all those who refuse to repent. In the Bible, three words are used in connection with eternal punishment: Sheol, or the grave, which is used in the Old Testament to mean the place of the dead; Hades, which is the Greek word for the underworld, the realm of the dead; and Gehenna, or hell, which was named after the Valley of Hinnom near Jerusalem, where children were sacrificed to the pagan gods. This is the place of eternal fire prepared for Satan and his angels, and all those who do not believe in God. This is the final and eternal state of the wicked after the resurrection and the last judgement. When Jesus warns against unbelief, He is trying to save us from the agonising, eternal punishment. Personally, I am unable to reconcile the untold mercies of God, narrated throughout the Old and New Testaments, with the harshest possible punishment, which would continue into eternity future. I harbour a secret hope that at the end time our mysterious Lord will once again show His profound mercy on all His subjects.

To summarise, God will separate His obedient followers from pretenders and unbelievers. The real evidence of our belief is the way we act and live. Admittedly, to treat all persons we encounter as if they are Jesus is no easy task. What we do for others demonstrates what we think about Jesus' words to us: feed the hungry, give the homeless a place to stay, look after the sick. The question before us this evening is: how well do our actions separate us from the pretenders and unbelievers?

Amen.

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