

3rd August 2025, Reflection – The Creed (8): ‘He will come again to judge the living and the dead’

As days go, today (3rd August) is quite a significant one in terms of events which decisively shaped the history of the world. On this day in 1492, Columbus left Spain and sailed for America. On this day in 1798, Nelson decisively defeated the French at the Battle of the Nile, thus ensuring British naval supremacy which contributed significantly to Britain’s imperial dominance in the 19th century. On this day in 1934, Hitler merged the offices of Chancellor and President, declaring himself as the ‘Führer’ for the first time. And, on this day in 1914, exactly 111 years ago, Germany declared war on Russia, Belgium and France. With the British responding the following day declaring war on Germany, today effectively marks the anniversary of the start of the First World War.

I didn’t plan it like this, but it strikes me as quite an important day to be reflecting on this line of the Creed: Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. As humans we all understand that actions have consequences. In fact, you might argue that part of what it means to be human, to bear the image of God, is to understand that actions have consequences. It’s the basis of every criminal justice system, as well as every child who’s sat on the naughty step.

But do our actions have consequences which go beyond the here and now? Interestingly, pretty much all of the world’s major religions agree that they do – they may describe it in different ways, which may or may not include God – but, for example, the concept of *karma* still implicitly testifies to the central idea that what you do in this life affects what happens next.

That said, **what is striking about the last two or three generations in our culture is how it has lost any sense of the idea of divine judgement.** I tried to find a single survey which asked how many people believed in it, and I couldn’t find a single study which named the Day of Judgement even as an idea to put to people. I found studies on the afterlife, or levels of belief in heaven and hell – but nothing at all asking people to consider the mechanism which leads to this ‘afterlife’. Put bluntly, even though the proportion of people who believe in the afterlife is now rising again, especially among younger people, as a society we’ve completely lost any sense that there’s a Judgement which has to come first. Somehow we all magically go from this world to the next...

So the big question is: does it matter now? Is the doctrine of Judgement still necessary, or is it some sort of theological dinosaur which went out of fashion not long after Hieronymus Bosch painted all those hair-raising images of people being chased by devils and so on?

If I achieve nothing else today, I want to put the case for **why the doctrine of Judgement remains at the heart of what we believe, and even dare I say it, is an extremely vital and healthy thing to believe. We need the Day of Judgement.** Yes, it might unsettle us, but there’s a reason it’s in the Creed as one of the handful of things we absolutely have to believe about Jesus, and about our lives and our world. In the next few minutes, let me show you why....

Fundamentally we need the doctrine of judgement because without it, justice is incomplete. As we look at the world around us, where wicked people so often seem to prosper, and escape justice in this life, the Day of Judgement reassures us that though people may get away with terrible things in this life, they won’t in the next. There will be a reckoning, and a perfectly just God will put things right. If you’ve ever been the victim of an injustice, you’ll know how awful that feels. To believe, to *know*, that God has not forgotten and will ensure that justice is done, is a great comfort.

And this is not just for personal circumstances – when we look at the news, it’s easy to feel despair, and to grieve for all the injustice we see. And last week we thought about how we can pray and act to make a difference in *this* life – right here, right now. But we know that we can’t put everything right – the doctrine of judgement reassures us that God will sort out the rest. The cries of the innocent and the vulnerable are heard, will be heard and will be set right.

As an aside, trusting in God’s judgment also means that **we leave vengeance to God.** It’s human to see what goes on in the world around us and want to see bad things avenged. But we are not God – if we can’t get justice through our systems of law, then it’s not up to us to take it into our own hands.

This is the depressing fixation of much of our modern story-telling, especially in TV and film – vigilantes playing God. But when the psalms cry out to God for vengeance, what they are doing is taking that away from us. God's justice is perfect – the doctrine of judgement allows us to leave it with God.

Second the doctrine of judgement embeds justice at the heart of what it means to be human, and of how we form societies. Put bluntly, if something matters to God, it matters to us. The fact that actions have consequences, as I mentioned at the start, is the foundation of all criminal justice systems. Our capacity to administer just punishments for wrongdoing is founded on the idea that God designed it that way.

But what's different, and better, about God's just judgement is that it isn't swayed by public opinion, power, bribery, or even time. There have been two big recent stories about compensation in the news: one is for sub-postmasters, which nearly everybody supports. The other is for the Church of England returning the profits it made from slavery two or three centuries ago, which most people have opposed and criticised. The interesting thing is that the latter involved far more injustice and human suffering, but as humans we tend to put a statute of limitations on wickedness. The fact that it happened 200 years ago, the argument goes, means we should forget about it – whereas the very recent suffering of sub-postmasters and their families demands immediate redress. But God doesn't see it like that: God's justice is eternal – it is described in the psalms as the foundation of his throne. So there is no statute of limitations on true justice. Everything is put right. Whatever you think about these two current stories, true justice is not time-limited, it is eternal – just because a building is old we don't knock it down.

Finally, without the doctrine of judgement, there is no salvation. Let's go back to basics and ask *why* Jesus came to earth at all? Because we needed saving, and we couldn't do it ourselves. All of us will one day face God Almighty on the great day of reckoning – as our passage in Hebrews says: we are destined 'to die once and... face judgement'. What is our plea? By then we can't put things right and we all know we can't be perfect – far from it. What right have *any* of us to enter God's heaven?

In steps Jesus – 'it's OK,' he'll say to the Father, 'this one's with me.' Jesus came, as Hebrews says, 'to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.' He took the just penalty we deserved on himself. And yes, there are many ways to explain what Jesus did on the cross, but you can't get away from this one, it appears so often in the New Testament: he bore our sin on our behalf. And because it was a perfect sacrifice, it was once for all. It doesn't need to be repeated. As the writer to the Hebrews declares: 'Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many.'

Properly understood, the doctrine of judgement always leads us back to grace, to the good news of the gospel. To know that we are accountable to God for everything leads us back to Christ, to the cross, to gratitude at what he did for us. But not just the cross – to know that we are assured of forgiveness and eternal life, that we will navigate the day of judgement as one of Jesus' own, also means we can live with freedom. And this is the lens through which we need to read that famous and, in many ways, terrifying parable of the sheep and the goats. The message is that how we live matters, and you might say that this superficially seems to contradict the grace of Christ which ultimately saves us.

But that misses a vital point. The reason Jesus is challenging his hearers is that they took their spiritual inheritance for granted. Their salvation did not lead to a changed life. And Jesus tells them that to really understand the life-giving good news of God's kingdom, our salvation naturally leads to good works. The fact that Jesus has already taken the punishment for all our screw-ups doesn't mean that we don't still try and do as much good as possible before he returns. **The final reason we need the doctrine of judgement is that being good and doing good still matters.** To follow Jesus is not just to pray a prayer and live how we like. Our actions still have consequences. Let's sow good and not evil.

As I close, I don't know if I've persuaded you! I personally believe passionately if more people believed in this line of the Creed the world would be much better place. Let's take the good news of Hebrews and the life-giving challenge of Jesus to heart. Let's live as if there really is a heaven, and Jesus really gave everything to make sure we're in it. I believe that Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. Hallelujah! Amen.