

Sermon for the Last Sunday of the Church Year, Year B

The Text: John 5:21-29

Has this past year lived up to your expectations? What was the best thing that happened to you this year? And what are you most grateful for this morning? Do you have a special prayer for the new Church Year that commences next Sunday? We can all be grateful that we are here today in God's presence in His House, to hear the good news He has for us, in a world where bad news features prominently. Today we especially remember people near and dear to us who have departed this life. Today is called the "Sunday of Fulfilment". We thank God that His plans and purposes for us are being fulfilled.

The Bible says "the memory of the righteous is a blessing (Proverbs 10:7)." It's a blessing indeed to remember before God those loved ones whom we have treasured over the years and are no more with us. As sad as it is that they're no longer with us on earth, it would be sadder still had their presences never enriched our lives. So we're grateful to God for all the blessings these people have brought into our lives. They are still loved by our Lord Jesus Christ. Nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of Christ. If they are with Christ and Christ is with us, they cannot be far away. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His people (Psalm 116:15)."

As well as a day of remembrance, today is a day of hope. Our hope in Christ isn't just wishful thinking. It is a sure and certain reality based on what happened to our Saviour at Easter. Hope is a strong word in the Bible, because it is able to thrive in the face of pain and suffering, and the

hope we have in Christ keeps bouncing back in the face of tragedy and loss. In the Bible, our Christian hope is associated with terms like assurance, confidence, boldness, anticipation and endurance. Hope is pictured as a rock, a strong tower or fortress, or an anchor for our souls (Hebrews 6:19). Hope is easier to maintain when we know we're loved. "Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (Romans 5:5)." That's why we can face the future free of fear.

"Perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18)." Jesus is God's perfect Love, come to save us rather than to condemn us. In this morning's Gospel, Jesus gives us His assurance and certainty about the eternal destiny for all who eagerly hear and embrace Him and His saving Word. "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears My Word and believes God who has sent Me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life (v24)." Millions of Christians over the years have found profound comfort from these words.

Natural human life is a progression from life to death. Faith in God our Father and His Son Jesus is the reverse: we go from spiritual death now, into life that has no ending. Some people ask "Is there life before death?" From time to time we see those who have lost the joy of living. Critics of Christianity have sometimes referred to its message of eternal life as a case of "maybe, someday". Jesus is not only in the business of offering us His gift of eternal life by faith in Him. Our Lord has also come to give us life, new life now, in all its fullness and richness *before* we die. Christ's astonishing forgiveness means we can live as if our life has only just begun. His forgiveness of our sinful past makes us brand new in God's sight. "If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation: everything old has passed away (2 Corinthians 5:17)."

Many converts to Christianity have joyfully exclaimed "Only then did I begin to live, to really live", when speaking of the time Christ first entered their lives. We eagerly accept Christ's gift of forgiveness because it enables us to face the Last Day without fear. Before any other judge we probably would seek to defend ourselves. But before Jesus Christ, we plead: "Lord, have mercy on me." Christ is not only our Judge. Above all, He is our Advocate and Saviour. He, as a fellow human being who shared

all the trials and temptations of a human life, is the best qualified to judge us. Jesus, who suffered terrible injustice and unfairness at His trial on Good Friday, is the person most qualified to be our own Judge. On the cross, Jesus offered up a perfect confession for our every sin and accepted the penalty we deserved.

From time to time we hear of terrible acts of injustice. In a world of sinful and imperfect people, acts of injustice will naturally occur. We're often not in a position to judge accurately because we don't know the full facts of the case. A Day of final, just and fair judgment will occur. When God's law shows us where we've sinned and fallen short of God's glorious standard, we flee to Christ because "there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1)." What incredibly welcome good news that is, news that while we're able, we must share with others. "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Judgment Day has been presented almost entirely in terms of repent or be damned, gloom, doom, retribution, hell-fire and brimstone. In response, let me say two things:

1: Judgment Day must be seen in the light of the Cross. There Jesus took our place and our judgment. In Christ, our Judgment has already taken place and we have been declared forgiven. That is at the heart of the Gospel; we are the recipients of undeserved grace.

2: So what happens on the Day of Judgment? Basically it is the day of truth. Now we see the truth in part ... then we shall see it in its fullness. Now we see our sin in part ... then in its fullness.

It will be a Day of awesome awareness of how far we fell short of the standards of God. It will be honest. It will be tough. And just because of that it will at the same time be a Day of unbelievable release, relief, and catharsis. Did not Jesus say "The truth will make you free"?

For countless people the Day of Judgment will be a Day of unimaginable relief and catharsis, because for the first time, their story will be heard by all. The whole story! Not distorted pieces ... with a perception here and a prejudice there ... but the whole story, and nothing but the story. Now the story is heard in part ... then it will be heard in full.

For countless people it will be the first time they have ever been understood and given a fair go. Think of what this will mean for those poor beggars who have never had the ego-strength, or the words, or the opportunity to tell their story. Those people who have never known what it is to be listened to and to be heard. Those whose cries to be understood have gone unheeded.

Romans 8:33-37 spells out the reasons why Christians can face the Day of Judgment with confidence and hope: “Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for His own? Will God? No! God is the One who has given us the right standing with Him. Who will then condemn us? Will Christ Jesus? No, for He is the One who has died for us and was raised to life for us and is sitting at the place of highest honour next to God, pleading for us. Can anything separate us from Christ’s love? Does it mean He no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or are hungry or cold or in danger or threatened with death? ... No, despite all these things overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.”

With St Paul we can eagerly look forward to our Lord’s visible appearance on the Last Day in all His majesty, glory and splendour. “From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for His appearing (2 Timothy 4:8).” Then, all that Jesus has done for us will be vindicated and gratefully celebrated. Can we receive any greater reward than to hear Jesus say to us on that Day: “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord” – a joy that will at last never, ever end. Amen.