

The Promise of Judgment
Sunday, October 18, 2009

II Thess. 1:3-10
Mt. 25:31-46

This week I read Paul's letters to the church at Thessalonica for the first time in many years. I hadn't realized that it had been so long. In Biblical studies *I Thessalonians* receives considerable emphasis because it is probably the earliest of Paul's letters. But the fact is that I have always struggled to find it interesting. When I was much younger I used to feel guilty because when I read it I felt sorry for Paul and wondered if the church at Thessalonica didn't make him want to go into a different line of work.

In both letters Paul reminds the followers of Jesus at Thessalonica to love one another, to be good to everyone, and not to be lazy good-for-nothings. Seriously, in these letters more than any others, Paul seems to find it necessary to tell the people to have a job; to work; not to spend all their time interfering in other people's business. It is to the Thessalonians that Paul says, "If a man won't work, let him try doing without eating."

The most distinctive feature of the two letters to the Thessalonians is Paul's attention to the second coming of Jesus. In the first letter he responds to the Thessalonians' fear that people who have died didn't live long enough to see Jesus' return: They're dead; they missed it. Paul assures them that God will not forget about the dead. By the time of the second letter they seem to have developed a different concern: Maybe Christ has *already* returned. It isn't clear to me whether they thought they should take some pragmatic actions in response to this return (sell their belongings and move to a commune in Northern California, for instance) or whether they were once again worrying about being left out: Christ had failed to notify them of his return because He had come for others, not for them. Whatever the case, Paul comforts and assures them. When Christ returns, he tells them, everyone will know.

I think I wouldn't have been so patient. If I had been off in Athens and Corinth (as Paul was) and had received the word that the Christians in Thessalonica were fretting about this sort of thing—somehow imagining that God, the Father of our Lord Jesus, could ever, ever, ever forget his people—I would probably have descended into a cussing fit, wondering why people would choose to think of God as the kind of God who could abandon the children who long for him. "How could any follower of Jesus imagine that God could do a thing like that?" I would have raged, "when Jesus always taught that God is like a father who loves his children and wants only good for them?" But, so far as the text reveals, Paul didn't descend into a cussing fit. Or if he did, he was over it by the time he wrote the letters: patient, loving, comforting lessons to people who were afraid, who didn't understand the depth of the love of God, people whose fears of their own insignificance had not quite allowed them to believe the Good News that they were children of God, that God was their father.

The Thessalonians appear to have been utterly ordinary people. Unlike the Philippians with their remarkable sense of joy. Unlike the Galatians or the Romans or the Corinthians with their partisanship and theological conflicts. The Thessalonians were just ordinary people (though maybe a bit too inclined to stories about the future) who needed to be reminded to keep working on love and to get jobs and do something useful as people.

I re-read these letters because I heard someone last week quote a passage from *II Thess.* that I had forgotten all about, the scripture I just read about when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in blazing fire—when he will distribute punishment, the penalty of eternal destruction, separation from the presence and the glory of God. (This particular imagery, incidentally, seems to be drawn from Isaiah 66:15, which speaks of God coming in his fiery chariot to bring destruction on the evil.)

As you know, I'm not fond of passages like this one in *II Thess.* I have no desire for God to bring harm to anyone. In particular, I am profoundly hostile to the preaching of eternal fiery torture that terrified me in my youth: the notion that God skewers people and barbecues them for ever and ever on some cosmic rotisserie.

I have not so learned the God who is the father of our Lord Jesus. God isn't the kind of God who tortures his children in fire. Jesus taught me that. So did Paul.

Jesus, of course, talked about the fiery Gehenna, which is traditionally translated "hell." Gehenna was the valley in Jerusalem that functioned as the garbage dump. Most of us old timers remember garbage dumps, before landfills came along: slopes where people came to dump their refuse, which was set afire to keep the rats down and that constantly smoldered with a nasty smell. I think that Jews long before Jesus had spoken of Gehenna as a metaphor for where the evil end up: the rejects of the universe, the garbage of humanity. I think the Pharisees and others believed that people who weren't properly religious were the "garbage" of the world and that God would dispose of them in the judgment. *They* would end up in God's garbage dump. Jesus, on the other hand, preached that the people who were in danger of God's garbage dump were those who thought they were hot stuff because of their religiosity, people whose self-righteousness deprived them of human mercy and decency, people who did not seek to become like the God who loves both good and evil and sends his rain and his sunshine on good and evil alike. You have heard enough of my preaching to know that I simply don't believe in the popular and repugnant myth that God assigns his children to endless fiery torture.

But that is not to say that I do not believe in the judgment. The judgment is spoken of in all the creeds, ancient and modern. Jesus and Paul both insisted that Jesus would return to judge people. And it was right for them to do so. The popular notion of an eternal fiery hell makes God a torturer; it contradicts Jesus' most persistent teachings about him. But judgment? That's a different thing.

Children of loving parents who are left alone and spend the day mistreating one another and acting like savages would be wrong to imagine that their parents will return, lock them in the basement, and torture them. They are not wrong to believe that their parents will restore order and distinguish good from bad, right from wrong. Judgment is a function of good. Good kings, parents, and governments must ultimately support what is good and reject what is wrong.

Much later, when they are no longer children, those people will encounter the true and inescapable judgment: reality. When those children have grown up, they will either have learned to love one another, or they will be alienated from one another with cold, critical hearts and bitter memories. Either they will have become self-controlled, honest people, or their childhood vandalism and destructiveness will have continued, and they will have become unbearable, or even felonious adults. The inescapable judgment is this: either we rise to good, or we sink into evil.

In his letter to the struggling, ordinary Christians at Thessalonica, Paul insisted on the reality of the judgment. These people, Paul recognized, were struggling to live life in the right way, trying to love one another and others, trying to honor God and to live as his children. It appears that the Christians at Thessalonica were not the cream of society. People treated them with contempt and perhaps violence: They were objects of persecution. And yet they kept trying.

But it appears that the Thessalonians could not help but worry and wonder: Does it matter? Does it matter what choices I make? Does it really matter if I keep trying to act honestly with my money when the successful people steal and cheat and prosper for their trouble? Should I really make the extra effort to encourage and show respect to the people around me as I go through my ordinary days? Should I really do as Paul says—work hard to make a little extra money so I can help others in need? Does it really matter how I live my life? Do *I* really matter? I think that's what they were worrying about when they kept wondering about the judgment: when it would come, whether God would recognize that they were trying even though it was hard, whether he would forget them, whether he had already forgotten them.

Both Paul and Jesus agree that our lives and choices do matter. This is the very core of the gospel: that people—apparently ordinary, insignificant people like you and me, all people—are children of God. He loves us. And we have the capacity to become like God: We, too can love and do good to all and harm to none.

This message of God's love is not a soft easy message: I'm okay; you're okay. To the contrary, it is a rebuke and a challenge. We are children of God, living in a world in which selfishness, cruelty, laziness, and all the other vices offer us an easy way to make our lives absolutely inconsequential. But God insists that our lives do matter. God himself calls us to live heroically for what is good and right—no matter what it costs us. Both Paul and Jesus insist that someday in some fashion our Lord himself, who dared to live heroically even though it cost him crucifixion, will come to us and tell us, "Well done. You have chosen to become a child of your Father, and that is what you are."

But let us be clear about this. If we do *not* choose to follow God, that too is a choice with consequences. We certainly can choose to spend our lives in bitterness, anger, cruelty, greed, stoned or drunk or otherwise wasted. We can treat our fellow humans as stepping stones or tools for our own transient pleasures. We can sneer at ideas like mercy and goodness and forgiveness. We can make that choice, but we need to be clear that doing so amounts to turning our backs on the offer of becoming children of God. It effectively says, "I choose not to learn the hard work of love, forgiveness, mercy, and service. I do not want to become like God."

Both Jesus and Paul insisted that that choice is a real and a tragic one. They used a variety of images to make the point. Jesus said that our choices about whether to feed the hungry, care for the sick, visit the imprisoned distinguish us either as sheep or as goats, as people who are suited to be welcomed by God or as people suited to be banished from his presence. There and in other places he said that treating others with cruelty and indifference will turn us into the sort of people who can properly be considered the garbage of humanity and cast into Gehenna. In other places Jesus spoke of the opportunity to live as God does—in love, forgiveness, and service—as "the Kingdom of God." "The Kingdom is right here, right now," he said. "Just do it." He said that living that way, the Kingdom of God, was like a great feast or party, true and joyous intimacy with God and man. He said that ignoring the invitation to goodness, love, generosity, and joy was like getting locked outside the feast. "There, outside" he said, "people weep and gnash their teeth" because they have

rejected what they should have accepted. In a variety of ways Jesus encouraged and warned people to understand that *our* lives, our choices *do* matter.

And Paul did the same. I am not so good a man as Paul. As I say, I would have gotten annoyed with those Thessalonians and their silly worries that God might forget them in the judgment. But Paul didn't slip into such contempt. He somehow managed to see them as a good-hearted teenager might see his six-year-old brother who is troubled by childish fears. The older boy recognizes the absurdity of those fears, yet he loves the little guy, draws him close, and calls him back to the business of growing up. In just that way Paul drew his brothers and sisters close and told them, "Your struggles matter. You must keep struggling to learn the ways of love. You must not give in to the pressures and persecutions. You must keep working to be strong and faithful and good because if you choose instead to be weak, to conform, to surrender to laziness or greed, to cruelty or fear, to being comfortable or high or otherwise self-indulgent, you are rejecting God's invitation to become like Jesus and like God."

Brothers and Sisters, we are a lot like the people at Thessalonica. We don't have any great and interesting problems here in our parish, or if we do I'm not aware of them. If Paul were to write a letter to us, I think it would be exceedingly boring—the sort of letter I might go years without re-reading. Probably most of our worries are pretty silly. It may be the case, though, that some of us (like the Thessalonians) sometimes wonder if it really matters whether we keep trying to learn the ways of God or just give up. When we feel that fear, we need to hear the stern, encouraging message that lies at the very core of the Gospel: Yes. It matters. It matters more than anything. It matters so much that God's love showed itself in the life of Jesus and on the cross. What we choose these days of our lives will someday come clear. When our Lord is revealed, our hearts, our souls, our desires will also be revealed. Our patient love and hope and mercy will be revealed, identifying us as children of God or sheep, or righteous, or whatever you care to call it. Our greed, laziness, self-indulgent pursuit of pleasure, our cruelty and lack of compassion. All such wickedness will be revealed as goats, as hostile to God, unrighteous, or whatever you please. And all those things will end. Call it hell or the garbage dump or exclusion from the feast or eternal destruction or missing our chance. Call it what you will, the time will come when all that is not like God will be exposed as unreal. It will no longer be. When our Lord appears, he will take with him what is good and leave behind what is evil. Thank God. That is what we have always longed for. That is what we daily struggle for: for what is good to be recognized and strengthened; for what is not to be recognized and set aside. We long for the day when our bitterness, cynicism, fear, lust, and coldness will finally die, vaporize, disappear in the bright, healing sunshine of reality and love. Then we will skip for joy and be strong and wise. Then we will see as we are seen and love as we are loved.

We do not know what the coming of Jesus will be like or when it will happen or even if "when" means anything when we are talking about God. But both Jesus and Paul assure us that our lives and our choices do matter and that our Father will never, ever abandon us. And so, Brothers and Sisters, let us persevere in hope and goodness and goodwill towards all—no matter what shall come. And let us never cease to pray for the final judgment, when evil will end and good attain its mature perfection. Let us never cease to pray as the earliest believers did, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus."