

Sermon Given by

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At the Morning Service on 28th November 2010

Acts 10:42-43

I want to begin this morning by reading the words printed on the sheet... Peter, one of the first disciples, is talking and he's speaking about Jesus Christ.

This is what he says: ⁴²"**He** - Jesus - **commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.** ⁴³ **All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.**"

They're words which are taken from one of the earliest recorded Christian sermons – which makes them worth studying, because they put us in touch with the original authentic Christian message.

More than that: they contain the truths that Jesus himself listed as 'core curriculum' stuff. Peter says unequivocally 'He' – Jesus – 'commanded us to preach these truths'. So they are rather like those Key Note study guides: shrinking down the study syllabus to its basics. I'm personally a big fan of those study guides – I reckon you can get a degree on them – in fact, why don't I just come clean? I know you can!

Anyway, it means that if anyone here or anyone known to us is trying to get the essential Christian message clear, these are words worth paying close attention to – we can check whether what we think Christianity is all about bears any resemblance to the real thing. What is it about in a nutshell? What are the key note facts? There are two of them and they're both about Jesus.

Here's the first: **In the future we will all be judged by Jesus.** This is clear in verse 42: ⁴²**He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.**

I've never been to Washington DC but on the dome of the Capitol Building I understand there's one very telling inscription. It's so high up that it's rarely seen: just a single line of Tennyson, which simply says this: 'One far off divine event to which the whole creation moves.'

So when the Capitol was built, someone gave an order to have that line inscribed there, above the seat of government of what would become the most powerful nation on earth. As a reminder that there is, in the future, for all nations and all people, great and small, 'one far off divine event to which the whole creation moves.'

In fact our verse puts it even more clearly – at the end of history is not just a divine **event**, but a divine **person** – Jesus Christ, whom God has appointed as judge of the living and the dead. That awesome prospect is a central truth which traditionally has been the focus of Advent Sunday. It means we must revise the way we normally think of Jesus Christ.

Particularly as Christmas approaches... You see, he's not just the Baby in the Manger. Of course we are very comfortable with that image – because it puts him on a level we can cope with: but he's **much** more than that...

Again, he's not just another great thinker – one face in the crowd – one figure on the religious landscape. No – he dominates the horizon... he is '**the one God appointed as judge of the living and the dead**' (Acts 10:42)

Of course Peter heard this teaching about judgement from the lips of Jesus himself. He was the one who spoke about the broad road that leads to destruction, about the wheat being separated from the weeds – and how he would himself be the judge – he will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left – then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.'

Those are Jesus' words... That is **why** this unpopular teaching is **one** of the keynotes of the Christian message.

It's a truth none of us can afford to ignore... If Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead, that is the Bible's way of saying everyone who's ever lived; and therefore every one of us will face him as our judge.

In one sense, judgement is actually very good news – deep down we have a longing that justice be done: that's true at the level of society: every police car we see, every crown court, every prison points to an indelible sense we all have that what is wrong must be punished: it would be a terrible thing if evil goes unchecked...

It's good news at the individual level as well... Because if there is no assessment of our lives, it means that nothing in my life matters. Sometimes we think we'd like that. I am not much of a tennis player – at the moment the most I do is to hit tennis balls for the dogs to give them exercise. Put me on a tennis court and what I like most of all is the knock up, when I can play whatever shot I like, just how I like – it doesn't matter where it goes; no umpires, no line calls.

But ask any member of the very active Shelford Tennis club and they will tell you, you can't carry on like that forever. Sooner or later the match has to start, when each shot matters and I play for a result. To knock up forever is just meaningless.

So if I can put it like this, it's good news that life isn't just an aimless knockabout, where I play how I like and nothing matters. No. There is an umpire – a judge whose decision is final; there are boundary lines because right and wrong actually matter; and all the shots of our lives have consequences – they aren't meaningless, they are profoundly significant.

The trouble is that because all our actions have significance the consequences are serious. You see, the Bible says that we all have taken a wrong turning in life. A decision to go our way, not God's way.

Maybe we still live our lives in a way that seems pretty good to others... A comparison might be that I am driving along on the motorway, keeping the speed limit – I'm not doing anyone any harm, not overtaking on the inside, I'm looking in the mirror and I've got both hands on the wheel, 10 o'clock and 2 o'clock...

And as I look there are plenty of others who are far worse: there's one person steering with his knees so he can send a text message, in between taking mouthfuls from a Big Mac and changing CDs... But me – I'm a good driver. There's just one thing I didn't mention: I'm on the M1 and I'm heading for Leeds, when I should be heading for London. I'm travelling in completely the wrong direction.

And you and I may appear to others and even to ourselves to be living a decent enough life – but if we are out of relationship with God it actually means the whole tenor or direction of our lives is wrong – I'm travelling through life, however nicely, on a collision course with god and heading for judgment.

Part of what happens is simply the consequences of trying to live life to the full – grandchildren, garden, golf and all the other things. But the danger of living life to the full is that you become so absorbed in it that you forget about judgement day.

It becomes like a game of musical chairs, chasing around from one amusement to another – that's fine for a while – but when the music stops, what then?

Everyone of us by nature lives our lives without God and when judgement comes we will head on into eternity without God – and without any of the good things which God may have given us in this life. And that is a dreadful prospect.

'Well!' you might say. 'Thanks a lot – a really encouraging Christmas message that is!' But there is a **second** key note fact here... In the future, everyone of us will be judged by Jesus – But in the present any one of us can be forgiven by Jesus: ⁴³ ***All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.***"

So if Judgement is Jesus work at the end of time, forgiveness was his great achievement when he first came among us within time...

That's why Christmas is worth celebrating: it marks the starting point of the events in which Jesus, the judge of the Living and the dead, came ahead of schedule to **prepare** people for judgement.

Of course his **birth** was wonderful enough!

That the Maker of all things and the one before whom every one who's ever lived will one day have to bow, should be shrunk down, down, down to be born as a baby, housed in a farmyard shelter, cradled in a feeding trough, with probably more animal than human witnesses... Amazing!

But very quickly as you read the accounts of Jesus life you realise that they are more interested in his **death** than in his birth... And isn't it striking how on Christmas day, when we should be celebrating Jesus arrival in the world, very often churches hold communion services – which speak of his body being broken and his blood shed when he died – a reminder that the hour for which Jesus came in to the world was actually... the hour in which he left it – because at the cross he took the judgement you and I deserve upon himself so we can be forgiven.

Why did he do it? Well only one explanation makes sense – because he **loves** us and he longs to spare us that judgement so we can know God personally, with our sins forgiven.

You and I ought to be bowled over that God should ever mount such an amazing mercy mission, that he should place such value on you and me!

In fact someone's written a drama that captures how it is a source of amazement to the angels: a senior angel is touring the universe with a junior angel, flitting across the infinite distances of space – viewing all the whirling constellations, until they enter one particular galaxy of 500 billion stars.

As the two of them draw near to our sun and its circling planets, the senior angel points out a small rather insignificant looking sphere, turning slowly on its axis – it looked dull as a dirty tennis ball to the little angel, whose mind was filled with the size and glory of all that he'd seen...

'Watch that one,' said the senior angel, pointing. 'Why?' asked the little angel. 'What's so special about that one? It's so small and dirty'. And then he listened in shamed silence as the senior angel explained that that little planet was the visited planet...

'Do you mean that our Great and Glorious Prince went down in person to that fifth rate ball? Do you mean to tell me' – and his face wrinkled in disgust – 'that he stooped so low as to become one of those creeping crawling creatures?'

'I do,' said the senior angel, 'and I don't think he'd like to hear you calling them creeping, crawling creatures in that tone of voice. For strange as it seems to us, he loves them. He went down to visit them and down still further to die in their place to forgive them and to lift them up to become like him.'

Jesus first coming achieves nothing less than that forgiveness – a fresh start in friendship with God. What brilliant news it is, that instead of meeting him **in the future** as Judge, we can meet him **now**, in advance, and receive forgiveness from him.

Of course, the very fact that Jesus came in advance to bring forgiveness is a warning that he is certain to come back as judge. Why else would he come in the first place, if judgement wasn't a reality? Do you think he'd have gone to all that effort unless it was absolutely necessary...

To enjoy the Christmas story is all very well, but to talk about Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, without acknowledging that Jesus will again enter the world stage and act as judge is sheer sentimentalism – for God to act in the life of Jesus and then leave it at that and forget about the world makes no sense. It's like a flight of stairs which leads nowhere and ends in mid-air. He only came, because desperate measures were needed – because we are on a highway to hell, if we don't receive forgiveness.

Some people try to evade the message of Jesus Christ by saying 'It's OK for you, but I'm not the religious sort.' The trouble with that thinking is that if our two key note facts are true, they're not just a matter of personal taste. They're true for all people, for all time. He has come once to provide forgiveness and he will enter world history once again as our judge... Judgement is the obvious conclusion, based on the fact that in history 2000 years ago in real space and time he came. And things in history are like gravity – they can't just be true for some people.

Imagine I take you up into the tower of the church-building and then we go up into the belfry and on to the lead roof for an aerial view of the parish.

Suppose when it's time to go down you turn to see me lifting one leg over the parapet: you say to yourself: 'He's finally lost it', but you're too polite to say that to me: 'hang on' you say kindly, 'isn't it best if we go down the way we came up, down the steps – I mean to say – what about the laws of gravity if you just jump from up here?' I can say to you if I like: 'Oh, don't worry about me, I'm not the gravitational type'.

But whether I believe it or not, gravity is true – it exists, independently of my personal taste. And history is like that as well. If Jesus Christ did come to bring forgiveness – Fact 1; then it stands to reason that you and I must need forgiveness and without it we will face him one day as our judge – unforgiven: Fact 2. But that need not be the case for anyone here: as verse 43 says: ***'everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name'***.

That also tells us that a definite response is required from us if we are to be forgiven. Forgiveness of sins comes not to everyone **FULL STOP**. But ***'to everyone who believes in his name'*** (Acts 10:43).

The response needed is not simply mental assent – enjoying singing the carols and hearing the story.

It is to take action – not just for today, but for life – to ask Jesus for forgiveness and a fresh start and rely on him day by day – to put my life and my eternity in his hands.

Maybe for someone here today is the day to do that. It might be the case that you have been coming to church for years; but if you're honest you've never yet come personally to Christ.

I would love to explain how you can, even this morning. I don't want to leave things vague and general. I want to explain exactly what steps you need to take to be sure of forgiveness for yourself.

After the final carol I will be waiting in the prayer room or if you'd prefer just phone me at home and I can come round and chat. But if you know that God has been speaking to you this morning, don't put it off.... There may never be a better opportunity than this Christmas to make it personal between you and Jesus Christ.

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)