

# Christ the King 2008

## LESSON: Hell Is not God's Creation

We all know and believe that Jesus will "come again in glory to **judge** the living and the dead." We affirm that belief each week when we pray the Creed.

But it is possible that we have not thought **deeply** enough about the meaning of this final Judgment.

- ✍ For example, we know that God is **infinitely merciful**.
- ✍ But in today's Gospel, Jesus welcomes **some** people into his eternal Kingdom, but **others** go off to **eternal punishment**.
- ✍ It is hard for us to understand **fully** how God's **mercy** can go together with eternal punishment, but we **can** understand it partially.

Today's Gospel passage can help us.

- ✍ When Jesus addresses the **first group** of people, the ones entering heaven, he says to them: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father..."
- ✍ But when he addresses the **second group**, the ones entering eternal punishment, he says to them: "Depart from me, you accursed."
- ✍ Notice how the blessing received by the first group **came from God** ("blessed by my Father"), but the curse received by the second group did **not** ("accursed").
- ✍ The second group purposely and freely **chose** to live their earthly lives **egocentrically**.
- ✍ They didn't enter into a **friendship with God**, because they didn't want the lifestyle of love and **self-giving** that goes with it.
- ✍ For their entire lives they resisted and rejected **God's many invitations** - the voice of conscience, the teachings of the Church, the example of believers, the lives of the saints, the beauties of creation.
- ✍ They freely chose to live **separate** from God.
- ✍ Now, after lives like that, would it be **merciful** for God to **force** them to spend eternity in his presence? No - it would be **cruel**.

Hell is not **God's** creation, it is the creation of those who feely and consistently choose to live without God.

## ILLUSTRATION: A Straight-Jacket Thought Experiment

One way to understand this is to think of a normal, healthy **family**.

- ✍ In a healthy family, the parents are very **concerned** about the well-being of their children.
- ✍ They worry about all the **bad things** that might happen to their children.

☞ And so, in the early years they **protect** their children from harm and **teach** them to be careful, good, and smart.

As the children grow up, the parents have **two choices**.

☞ The first choice is to gradually give the children **more freedom and responsibility**, as corresponds to their age.

☞ But this is a **risk**.

☞ There is a chance that the children will **abuse** their freedom, as the Prodigal Son did, and do **damage** to themselves.

The second choice is to put the children in **straight jackets** and control absolutely everything that happens to them:

☞ force them to eat only the **most nutritious** food;

☞ watch only good quality **entertainment**,

☞ have contact only with **good people**,

☞ never be exposed to **temptations or dangers**.

☞ This way, they completely **minimize** the risk of injury, hardship, or youthful mistakes.

The only **negative** aspect of this choice is that the children are no longer being treated as **human beings**. Which choice is more loving, more **merciful**?

Clearly, gradually giving the children more freedom and responsibility is the **more loving thing to do**, even though it involves a **risk** - the risk that the children may **abandon** their parents altogether, in fact.

God is our Father. He loves us too much to put a **straight jacket** on us; he loves us so much, that he is even willing **to let us go**, if we so desire. That's why the existence of Hell doesn't contradict God's infinite mercy.

## **APPLICATION: Two Practical Consequences**

The Last Judgment has at least **two very practical consequences** for our day-to-day lives.

First, it means that our decisions, even the small ones, **really matter**.

☞ In the **Sistine Chapel** in Rome, where the cardinals meet to choose the next pope, there is a monumental painting of the Last Judgment by Michelangelo.

☞ One of the reasons that painting was put there, back in the late 1500s, was to **remind** the cardinals that they will have to **answer to God** for the choice they make of the next pope.

☞ **We too** are going to have to answer to God for how we use the gifts he has given us: for self-indulgence, or for self-giving.

☞ Even our choice of candidates for President have a lasting impact – whether we base our vote on selfishness and finances, or on Eternal Values such as the protection of and respect

for human life at every stage. One choice is for earthly kingdoms, the other for God's Kingdom.

- ✍ Our choices and efforts in life **matter** to God; they have a **lasting impact**, for good or evil; they really do **mean** something and can effect how we are judged

The **second** consequence has to do with **suffering**.

- ✍ The world is full of **apparently meaningless suffering**:
- ✍ innocent children being kidnapped and sold into slavery,
- ✍ entire cities collapsing in earthquakes,
- ✍ good people being cruelly oppressed.
- ✍ Each one of us experiences at least **some** of this suffering in our own lives, often in **hidden** ways.
- ✍ But this suffering is **not the end of the story**; injustice does not win.
- ✍ The **promise** of the Last Judgment is **Christ's promise** that all things will in the end be **set right**, justice **will** be done, all that has been **wrongly** destroyed will be **fully** restored.
- ✍ God really is the **Good Shepherd**, as today's First Reading and Psalm tell us, and he really will lead his followers **out** of the valley of darkness.
- ✍ This is why Pope Benedict, in his second encyclical, called the Last Judgment an "**image of hope**."

By giving us this liturgical celebration, the Church hopes that we will **not forget about** our the final judgment by our King nor about His Eternal Kingdom.

- ✍ The Church is a **wise mother**. She knows that we have a **built-in tendency to forget** about these things.
- ✍ The **pleasures, possibilities, and worries** of life in this fallen world are real. They are **strong magnets** that try to **monopolize** our attention.
- ✍ But Christ is **stronger**. And he has **much more to offer** - eternal life, in fact, meaning, purpose, forgiveness, wisdom, and the strength of his grace.

And yet, he is not a **tyrant** – placing us in straightjackets. He **offers** us citizenship in his Kingdom, but he leaves us free to accept or reject that offer. Today, let's renew our **acceptance**. When he **proves his love** for us once again in the sacrifice of this Mass, let's **profess our love** for him.

- ✍ Let's invite Christ into our **minds**, and let him **reign** there through our **firm belief** in all of his teaching – revealed in the Sacred Scriptures and the teaching of the Church – and not ignore them as if they were just one more opinion among others.
- ✍ Let's invite Christ into our **wills**, that part of us where we make our **decisions**, and let him **reign** there through our **loving obedience** to his **commandments** - especially the commandment to **love our neighbors** as he has loved us.

✍ Let's invite Christ into our **hearts**, that **secret center of our souls** where we **treasure** things, where our **affections** reside, and let him **reign** there by putting every natural desire in **second place**, behind our desire to **know, love, and follow our King**.

In a few moments, when we pray the Creed, we will **formally profess** our belief that Christ, the eternal King, will come again to judge the living and the dead. When we profess belief and our love for Christ, let's do so with **confidence**, promising to live **each day** walking **close** beside our Good Shepherd, who is Christ the King.