

The Dean is thinking about death and judgement as we approach Good Friday, through the lens of the letter to the Hebrews.

As our bishop prepares to retire this summer, I've also been thinking ahead, to the inevitable, to my own retirement. It is still some way off, but I recognise that finishing a demanding and enjoyable job is going to be a huge bereavement, and it's probably best to give it some thought before it happens.

The same is true of death, though few of us give it the thought and preparation that we should.

The writer to the Hebrews is robust in his message, at the end of Chapter 9 he writes, "It is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that the judgement".

If we give thought to our death, do we think also about the prospect of judgement?

Judgement is not such a common topic of conversation, or indeed sermons, these days as it has been in the past. Perhaps we are more confused about the nature of sin and so uncertain on what basis we might be judged. Perhaps we are used to a variety of explanations for people's wrongdoing and quick to claim them as excuses for our own frailty and failing.

Yet, we know that we are not perfect, that we do those things which we ought not to do, and leave undone those things which we ought to have done.

Beyond our individual failings, we are citizens of a world in which our very structures and ways of life do damage to others, whether we think in terms of the inequalities between rich and poor, or the exploitation of the earth in far away places so that we can enjoy cheap tea, coffee, furniture or clothes.

A clear eyed and realistic look at our lives
will reveal that we are indeed sinners
in need of redemption,
of saving from the consequences of our sin.

The letter to the Hebrews was written for a community which was used to a set of rituals
for dealing with sin.

These included both personal and collective animal sacrifice
as a symbol of the blood tie
between God and the people,
the mutual covenant
enacted in the temple in Jerusalem.

As new followers of Jesus, these formerly Jewish believers were anxious
to know what would replace the familiar temple sacrifices in this new worshipping
community.

So the writer explains how the temple rituals were a symbol, a picture,
which pointed towards the one and only sacrifice
that could make a real difference in their hearts,
the sacrifice made by Jesus on the cross.

They did not need to heap their sins
upon the back of a scapegoat,
sent out into the desert each year
on the festival of Yom Kippur,
because Jesus carried those sins to the cross once and for all.

In the past, the priests would take the sacrificial blood into the holy of holies,
a place – originally in the tent or tabernacle in the desert, and later in the temple –
where only the high priest could enter,
to make that offering to God.

But, Jesus will take the offering of himself
into the real presence of God,
far beyond this earthly realm.
The offering is no longer symbolic, but is real.

This one offering is enough for all sin,
and not only for single sins,
but for sin through all time,
past, present, and future.

Later in the letter,
the writer tells us that having done this,
Jesus sits down at the right hand of God.
This is a sign that the work is completed.
You only sit down when all the work is done. The servant always stands ready to do more,
but the Son has done it all
in the offering of himself, and he sits.

The place he sits is the place from which he will judge us.

It is splendidly represented
in our great West Window,
where Christ is enthroned,
surrounded by a great multitude of worshipping angels.

When we come to meet Christ face to face,
we will finally see ourselves
with the clarity which only God enjoys.
All those things that we have quietly forgotten, or buried, the things we ignored,
will be there
alongside the mistakes
that we have acknowledged.

And we can imagine the sense of shame and failure that we might feel at that moment.

Except that we know something more about this judge.
He has forgiven us.
That is the whole message of the resurrection.

The sinless victim of our sin
does not seek to punish us,
he has broken the cycle of violence and retribution, it is no more.
This is the new covenant, the new promise, sealed with the blood of Jesus,
that we make present afresh in the Eucharist every time we break the bread
and share the cup,
the broken body
and the outpoured blood of Jesus.

The liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer invites us frequently
to confess our sin and wickedness,
but never forget that
at the heart of the Eucharist is that message,
you are forgiven.

It is wise to be clear eyed about our failings,
Not least so that we are less judgemental about the failings of others,
And more compassionate towards those who disappoint us.
But let us never forget that the true message of the cross
is one of extravagant, foolish
and generous love,
poured out for us and for all the baptised
throughout time and space, once and for all,
for the forgiveness of sins.
Amen.