

Sunday of the Last Judgment

Sermon by Fr. Photius

Recognition to Metropolitan Anthony Bloom for parts of this content.

Vision of the Day of Judgment: standing before God Who is all Beauty, Love, Goodness, Holiness, Life, Truth, Reality, and realizing how much we have defiled, made ugly, His image, His icon, in us, how little we have loved Him, how much we have taken His love and caring providence, and the love of others who have given out of the abundance of what they have received from God, all for granted.

Judgment Day is when all will be revealed, when our souls will be bared, when the time for faith will be over because faith is the certainty about things not seen – (instead we shall see God and God will see us, we will know Him as He knows us). The time for hope will also be over, because hope is the expectation of something in the future, but all will be fulfilled on Judgment Day, the eighth day, the end of time, of becoming (change), and the first day of eternity. As a verse from the Vespers service states, our secret sins will be revealed and we will stand ashamed before God and the angels. There is little or no sense of shame in today's world – all is allowed – there is general license for the flesh (the world) to dominate; ego is supreme – and false belief in man as the measure of all things reigns supreme – that man deserves anything and everything that he craves. There is a total loss of true perspective and the obliteration of the remembrance of God – all is pride and self love.

What is left to man for his defense on the Day of Judgment? – not faith or hope – only love. The whole meaning of life is love, of bearing the fruits of love, whether there is compassion in our hearts or whether or not we have responded to those in need or those who are suffering, whether our life is an expression of generous and sacrificial love – creative, perceptive, thoughtful – and whether we have lived up to the Gospel in truth (without hypocrisy), so that we will be recognized by God as part of His own flock.

Supposing that we are unable to discern the image of God in some other person, have we at least shown some compassion, empathy, or sorrow? Have we learned how to truly love others? Love is such a greatly misused and misunderstood word and emotion, especially in the modern world. Have we been able to show solidarity with others (especially in the mystical body of Christ, the Church?) Have we shown faithfulness, truth, loyalty, being at one in soul, in heart and in action with others in Christ, Who is our

supreme Friend? Have we ourselves been filled with the light of God and shown with that light in all directions? –Or to be God’s own presence shining through us so that others can give glory to God? To be human is to be defined by our relationship with God, to be in His Image, to be in communion with God Who alone can reveal and communicate love and all good things to our hearts – the fullness of all good (Who is Christ) – to have God’s vision in our eyes, His sacrificial gift of self in our own selves.

Have we mourned over our separation from God through our sins? (St. John Climacus says that we are judged on whether we have mourned over our sins.) Have we been able to sacrifice ourselves and refrain from passions through fasting and concentrated prayer? For what defiles a person is not what goes into the mouth, but what comes out of it, from our hearts, more than abstention from food. Abstinence is just a small recognition of how much we have corrupted God’s creation – it is an act of reparation, of making amends, for polluting and destroying a world which man was originally called to guide back in thanksgiving into eternity, into the perfect beauty and glory which God intended for it – to make this world of ours conform to God’s world, His Kingdom, where we could rejoice in Him and with each other in oneness of being.

God is waiting for us to respond to Him. St. Paul says in his letter to the Romans (10:17): “So then Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” God’s Word, the Logos, Who created the universe and all that is in it, precedes our hearing – in fact, our faculty of hearing, seeing, thinking, etc is God’s creative gift of grace to man, and through hearing God’s Word we grow in faith. As St. John relates in the Book of Revelation (3:19-20) in Christ’s words: “As many as I love I rebuke and chastise. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me.”

God is not only Love but Truth – the ground of being, what we could say is the ultimate Reality, not the figment of our imagination or ego. We must face Truth and Reality humbly, bravely and unsparingly of ourselves. We must let our conscience, our vision, agree with God’s vision of who we really are when in the process of being transformed by God. We must see ourselves as God sees us. St. Paul (1Cor 13:12) says, “For now we see through a glass, darkly, but then face to face; now I know in part; but then I shall know even as also I am known.” We must see ourselves humbly, not despondently or despairingly, so that deep and concentrated prayer can be a lens of focus, a window of revelation of ourselves and our relationship with God.

Christ rewards each person according to whether his or her works are done with faith or without faith in God, in virtue or in passion, in humility and love and compassion, or in disdain, anger, or self-love (which includes desire for praise). The death of the soul is real death, the annihilation of being, truth, and personhood.

St. Gregory Palamas states that the body is clothed with divine illumination and glory just as is the soul at the Last Judgment, as it was in glory when it was first created. That is so reassuring for the Christian believer – to know that body and soul partake of the all-glorious radiance of the Kingdom of God. St. Mark the Ascetic states that the mercy of God is hidden in sufferings which are not of our choice. If we accept such sufferings patiently, they bring us to repentance and deliver us from everlasting punishments.

We are to be judged on God's scale, not by human standards, and judged all the time for every act, thought, and word during our life – paradoxically, this very fact reveals to us the potential greatness to which we are called – to be saints – to be great in God's eyes in the sense of being true adopted sons of God.

One of the Fathers and the ikos in the Matins service after the sixth Ode, says that what burns sinners in Hell after the Last Judgment is their conscience. Conscience of their evil deeds and life is the flame that is never quenched because they cannot withstand God's glory, radiance, and love which reveals all things for what they truly are. The conscience of sinners becomes their own consciousness of the inability of their self-will to dominate in a realm where God's Being and Will are all in all, where nothing is concealed in a Kingdom of light and love, where sinners must turn away from God's glory and vision in despair and agony, where sinners must unwillingly acknowledge the absolute justice of God's Judgment.

Looking forward to next Sunday – the Sunday of Forgiveness – when we ask forgiveness from God, let us be able to be at deep peace, trust and love with one another – to give peace and forgiveness to each other and to ask for peace and forgiveness from each other, out of a responsibility and out of a creative sense and need of joy, and for repentance, knowing that our brother is our life. Let us be responsible, freeing ourselves from our passions and bad habits, so that we do not become a stumbling block for others. Amen.