

Thirty Third Sunday of Ordinary Time

The church's liturgical year begins, as you now, with Advent - a time of preparation for Christmas. So next Sunday is the last Sunday of the Church's year. For this reason, we are invited by the readings of today's Mass to look at the goal of our life and to ask 'What is my life all about? Where am I headed?' We are invited to make a review of the past year.

In the Gospel, Jesus speaks of the end of *his* world, the world of his contemporaries. He could see that it was about to collapse. His disciples had asked him a larger question: they wanted to know about the end of *the* world. Jesus has nothing to say about that. It is a question that lies beyond human reckoning. His reply, however, does emphasize the importance of how we live. So, as another liturgical year draws to a close, let us pause and take stock. Are we following our deepest desires, or are we allowing ourselves to be distracted from our heart, laughing half our laughter and crying half our tears. Jesus came that we may live to the full. Is that how things are for us?

In our earthly courts we go before a judge or a magistrate who hears the evidence and, if we are guilty, he or she imposes a punishment determined by law. The judgment of God is very different. We simply stand before God as we are, knowing that we cannot hide from God who sees the whole truth in all its complexity. The judgment passed is simply a declaration of the ways things really are. This is true now. It will be true when we stand before God in what we call the 'last judgment'. If at the conclusion of our life our hearts are open to God, we will enjoy communion with him for all eternity – we call that 'heaven'. If we have closed our hearts on God, with obstinate determination, we choose to spend all eternity without communion with God – a condition we call 'hell'.

God does not punish. God will always love you and love me. But God cannot and will not force his love upon us. It is important to realize that sin cannot change God. It changes us and its effects can be eternal, but what happens to us if we obstinately reject God is the direct result of our rejection of God, not a punishment that God inflicts upon us because we are sinners. God's one desire is to be in communion with those whom he has created precisely for this purpose. If we choose to be with God, he receives us with delight into heaven. If we persist in obstinately rejecting God, he reluctantly accepts our foolish and stubborn choice, for God must declare the truth. We might be able to pretend to ourselves and we might be able to deceive others, but God knows the way things really are, and it is on the way things really are that our eternity depends.

The Catholic Catechism reminds us that: 'God 'desires all to be saved'[1Timothy 2:4], and for him 'all things are possible'[Matthew 19:26]'(Catechism n.1058). God has only one plan for each of us. His purpose is that we receive his love and live in the communion that we call heaven, with God and with all who love him. This is expressed quite beautifully in today's entrance antiphon: 'The Lord says: My plans for you are peace and not disaster; when you call to me, I will listen to you, and I will bring you back

to the place from which I exiled you'(compare Jeremiah 29:11).

This design of God corresponds to our deepest longings. Speaking of these longings, the Catechism quotes a beautiful passage from a letter written by Saint Ignatius of Antioch to the Christian community in Rome as he was being taken there to be thrown to the lions in the Colosseum: 'Earthly longings have been crucified; in me there is left no spark of desire for mundane things, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me, 'Come to the Father'. There is no pleasure for me in anything that perishes, or in the delights of this life. My heart longs for the bread of God – the flesh of Jesus Christ; and for my drink I crave that blood of his which is undying love' (Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Romans 6,1-2; quoted Catechism n.1011).

We can all relate to this feeling, and the readings of today's Mass make clear, we have nothing to fear from God when our lives come to be judged. Jesus, the Son of Man, is pleading for us, now. He will be there at the judgment. He assures us that God hears the cry of the oppressed. Jesus gave his life for us, and longs to redeem all of us and to invite us to enjoy his own communion of love for ever. What we must fear is our own stubbornness or carelessness - our own failure to discipline our lives and focus them upon our goal.

The only thing that can prevent us enjoying the communion of love for which we were created is our sinning in a way that kills our soul (we call this 'mortal sin'), and our persistence in a sinful way of life in spite of the constant stream of grace that comes from God to bring us to change. Saint Paul challenges us: 'Do you despise the riches of God's kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? Do you intend to persist with your hard and impenitent heart?'(Romans 2:4-5).

The Catechism clearly states: 'God predestines no one to go to hell; for this, a wilful turning away from God (a mortal sin) is necessary, and persistence in it until the end'(n.1037). 'To die in mortal sin without repenting and accepting God's merciful love means remaining separated from him for ever by our own free choice. This state of definitive *self-exclusion* from communion with God and the blessed is called 'hell''(Catechism n.1033).

The Church invites us today to get in touch with this feeling and to check our lives to see whether we are following our heart's desire or being caught up in the distraction of our fickle desires with the result that we are wasting our lives, and even putting our eternity in jeopardy. If we want to know what the Last Judgment will be like, all we have to do is look at Jesus on the Cross. That is God's complete statement of the fidelity of his love for us; and that is God's final verdict on what really matters in human life. Whatever we go through, God will raise us to himself as he raised Jesus. He asks us, like Jesus, to keep believing and trusting, and giving ourselves in love. If we fail, even if we fail seriously, his love is always inviting us and encouraging us to change our hearts and return to him.

The Catechism quotes Saint John of the Cross who wrote: 'At the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love'(John of the Cross, Saying 64; quoted Catechism n.1022).

When we consider the Last Judgment, the attitude which should characterize our reflections is given to us today in the Responsorial Psalm (Psalm 16). Remembering Jesus, we should be buoyed up with immense hope and longing, for all God's power is directed to releasing us from sin, and his loving Spirit comes to us from the heart of Jesus inviting us, wherever we are and whatever we have done, to come to him and be forgiven and to live, through love, in his presence.: 'Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, 'You are my Lord; the only good I have is you.' ... The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; my destiny is in your hands. ... I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me. I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be swayed. Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. ... You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore'.

Another year in the Church's life is drawing to a close. A section of our life is over and can never come again. Let us pray earnestly today to recover our vision and to have the courage to turn away from anything that hinders our journey towards that fullness of joy for which we were created and for which we long.