

Last week we brought the liturgical year to a close declaring that Jesus is our King, the King of the universe, whose reign will know no end. But it is also a kingdom still in the making. We begin this new liturgical year reminding ourselves that our King will return at the end of times to bring his kingdom into its fullness. As he said in today's Gospel, the Son of Man will descend in power and glory, and our task is to be ready—to be vigilant—to pray for strength so that we might *stand before the Son of Man*. Hearing Jesus speak of end-times in this way presents us with a very different image of Jesus than we may be most comfortable with.

It reminds us that we exist in this phase of our existence, citizens of this earthly kingdom, for just a limited time. But we were made to live forever in another world. Still, there is probably not a single person ever who hasn't wondered: "*What happens when we die?*" Plenty of people—at your place of work, at your school, perhaps in your home—don't believe there is anything beyond death, that we just cease to exist.

But that's not what happened to Jesus. This same Jesus who rose to new life, calls us to follow, saying, "*Whoever believes in me has eternal life*" (John 6:47). And by the way people of virtually every age and culture have believed in something transcendent beyond this life, a new reality that follows death. Of this, our Scriptures and our Church teaching tell us there are *Four Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell*.

So, regarding *death*, it is the disordered state in which the body and soul, which God brought together are torn apart from one another: the body sleeps while the immortal soul awaits the day in which it is reunited to the body.

The second of these is *judgment*. The *Book of Revelation* describes a *final judgment* of all nations that will occur at the end of times (20:11-15). But there is also what is called a *particular* or *personal judgment* that occurs at the moment of death. It's what we hear described in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16). It will be an evaluation of what we chose for ourselves in this life: the things of God or instead, things that obscure us from God. To be clear, the Church doesn't judge you, and I certainly don't—that's God's task alone.

Regarding *hell*, we are told that at the *particular judgment*, hell is a possibility. Some say that hell is only a man-made concept intended to scare and control people, but Jesus says it's a reality. And for all the scary images that are associated with it, the Church simply says that it's permanent separation from God, for those who, despite God's persistent offer of mercy and grace, decisively say, "*No thanks, I don't want you or what you have to offer*" (CCC, 1033).

Sometimes people want an excuse to reject God, asking things like, "*If He's a good God, why would He deny us heaven?*" He doesn't. Instead, it's us who choose against it. The more beguiling question is why we would choose the things that we know separate us from Him. But God has always had *heaven* in mind for us. And thankfully, He is merciful, never ceasing to hold that desire.

We need an occasional wake-up call for whatever way we continue to take His love, patience, and mercy for granted, telling ourselves, *I've got plenty of time...and furthermore I'm not so sure the things our faith teaches really matter...* For all the ways that we can fool ourselves into believing that we're securing ourselves in this lifetime—our stocks, our insurance policies, etc.—we realize that death is the great equalizer. None of those things will help when our life's breath leaves us. I hear it said, all too often: those in their later years of life and sometimes those near death: "*I wish I had done it differently...I wish I'd been a better model for my children...I wish I had put more time into the things that really matter... a little less prideful*".

For those of us who want to live in accord with God's will, even as we struggle to give ourselves over to Him completely, we needn't fear death or judgment. We need only receive the gift of mercy and be transformed by it. But also, the Church's beautiful teaching about Purgatory reminds us that if at least some part of us want's what God wants, His mercy follows us beyond death.

While we don't fixate on the end-times, day in and day out, on the other hand, may we not altogether ignore the *Four Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell*. As we begin Advent, let us make time to consider whatever ways we need to re-order ourselves, to reprioritize in our lives. As we pray, "*Thy Kingdom come*" let us live in His

beautiful and abundant mercy, preparing our souls, and the souls of those entrusted to us, for what lies ahead with the eventual coming of our Lord.