

32nd SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (November 7, 2021)

Actions have consequences. A youngster eats too much Halloween candy and gets a stomach ache. You drive on country roads at night without paying attention and you have one of those “Close Encounters of the Deer Kind”. Or you experience disappointment once again when you watch your favorite team lose yet another late fourth-quarter lead—fellow Vikings fans: am I not right after that game against Dallas last Sunday night?? Actions do indeed have consequences...

Those kinds of actions and consequences, though real, aren't the most momentous things that we have to worry about. But there are other actions and patterns and ways of life whose consequences are much more important...and even eternal. This month of November is the last month of the church year, and the Mass readings this month give us the chance to think about those “Four Last Things”: death, judgment, heaven and hell. The readings today in particular lend themselves to a consideration of judgment—what our eternity will be as a result of how we have conducted ourselves in this earthly life. In other words, actions have consequences.

The author of Hebrews (second reading) reminds us that we will die once (which means, among other things, that there is no such thing as ‘reincarnation’). And after that one-time-only death comes judgment. Jesus in the gospel talks about the scribes who, as a consequence of wanting to be the center of all attention while mistreating the poor, “will receive a very severe condemnation.” The New Testament is filled with many such statements. To give just one other example, St. Paul affirms that “[T]he lives of all of us are to be revealed before the tribunal of Christ so that each one may receive his recompense, good or bad, according to his life in the body”: (2 Cor. 5:10). Actions have consequences.

The Church speaks and teaches about judgment in two ways. The Last Judgment is that which will happen with respect to the entire human race at the end of time with the second coming of Jesus (that will be the focus of our readings next weekend, so stay tuned...). But first comes the particular judgment that we each will face at the moment of death. The Catechism affirms that “each will be rewarded immediately after death in accordance with his works and faith” (n. 1021)—and that will be “either entrance into the blessedness of heaven—through a purification [i.e. purgatory] or immediately—or immediate and everlasting damnation” (n. 1022). I've spoken before about purgatory; I won't repeat all that now. Briefly, remember that Jesus said we must be perfect, we must be made perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48). If the person has not been fully open to that purifying and perfecting action of God's grace in this life, then that process is completed—again by God's merciful grace—in the process of purgatory. In that way, as the U.S. bishops put it, they obtain ‘a heart that is totally open to [God]’ [*U.S. Catechism for Adults*, p. 154].

So how do we think about judgment, especially the particular judgment that we will face it at the end of our earthly lives? Or maybe the more fundamental question: do we think about it? We need to do so; it will indeed happen, because we will all face death at some point. I certainly hope it's not real soon for any of us, though sometimes it does happen in shockingly unexpected ways as we are all too aware of this past week. And by no means should we obsess about it or live in great fear each day; rather, we simply need to be realistic and remember that how we live,

how we relate to God and how we treat others, the choices we make in this life will have a direct bearing on what eternity will be for each of us. Actions have consequences.

Back to the question of how we think about judgment: there are two extremes that we need to avoid. The first is seeing God as a harsh judge who is just looking for any excuse or reason to condemn us to eternal punishment. One of the most well-known examples of this approach is shown in Jonathan Edwards, a Calvinist minister back in 1700's in colonial America. In a notorious sermon in 1741, Edwards said: "The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as being worthy of nothing but to be cast into the fire". Well...have a nice rest of the day, right?? Yes, God hates sin—but only because of the harm it does to us human creatures who he loves with such great mercy and compassion that he allowed his Son to die for us to reconcile us to himself! But the idea that God takes hate-filled delight in sending anyone to hell is absurd and is in itself an offense against the merciful love of God.

The other extreme is more evident these days, and that is the idea that God does not judge, that all will enjoy the perfection of eternal joy in heaven regardless of how they conduct themselves in this life. First, the Bible gives no support whatsoever for such a view; in fact, it says precisely the opposite as I mentioned earlier. I can't help but think that such an approach is nothing but wishful thinking: "God loves me unconditionally; so it doesn't matter what I do. I don't want to change, and I can give into my temptations whenever I want." Yes, God loves everyone infinitely and perfectly, but he does not force or require us to return that love and live in accord with his will for us. God has given us the power and the freedom to say 'yes' to him, and to say 'no' to him. We know what he wants for us, and God most certainly knows what he wants for us—our true and eternal joy. He waits for our decision, our decisions that we make each day. Our actions, our decisions have consequences.

I want to close with one of the prayer options in the burial service at the cemetery that speaks powerfully to these realities:

Lord God, whose days are without end and whose mercies beyond counting, keep us mindful that life is short and the hour of death unknown. Let your Spirit guide our days on earth in the ways of holiness and justice, that we may serve you in union with the whole Church, sure in faith, strong in hope, perfected in love. And when our earthly journey is ended, lead us rejoicing into your kingdom, where you live forever and ever. Amen.

God grant that the decisions we make and the actions we take in this life will lead to the consequence of rejoicing forever with all the saints and all our loved ones in his perfect peace.