

Pastor's Pen: 4 Last Things: Part 2

Death, Heaven, Hell, and Judgement. In Catholic Theology, these are considered the 4 last things. Every human person from the very beginning to the very end of time has or will die. Each person will be judged by God. Each person will eventually end up in heaven or end up in hell. The heresy of universalism tells us that there is no human person in hell; that all people end up in heaven. As I wrote last week, universalism makes morality a moot point at best or non-existent at worst.

Death

For every person who has been conceived or will ever be born, life in this world ends in death. We might die in the womb or we might live for over a century. We might spend the time between conception and death in good health or poor health. We might be born in great wealth or crippling poverty. We might be born into a free culture or into a place of totalitarianism. Regardless of all these things, no matter how wealthy or powerful we have been, each of us in our turn will die.

Death in this life is not the end though. There is a certain comfort for those who do see death as an end. If it is the end, then the choices I have made have no bearing past death. We might be well thought of or scorned, but we won't have any conscience to react to it. If, however, there is something past the point where our physical body ceases to function, then what we do in this life might have a bearing.

Within Catholicism, death is that point when our body ceases to function. Death applies to the physical body. The soul, though, does not die. It is immortal. How existence is after death is determined. Between point A and point B lies the second of the four last things: judgment.

Judgement

Many believe that judgement is where a third party declares what someone has done as good or evil and punishes accordingly. Judgement is more than that. Judgement is a laying out of the facts and acknowledging that these acts have consequences. Judgement is about saying, "These are choices you have made and here are the consequences that accompany them." Actions always betray who the center of our life is. In His moral Law, God gauges morality of agape, that is, divine love. The mark of judgement will be did we love God and our neighbor as God loves us.

In the Last Judgement sequence from the Gospel of Matthew, those who are on His right are judged to have loved as God loves in how they treated those in need. Those on the left are judged as having not loved as God loves in how they treated those in need. In Catholic teaching there are two final destinations for the judged: heaven and hell. Purgatory is part of the path to heaven. I will explain that in a second.

As long as we draw our breath, we have the opportunity at conversion. We have the ability to change the outcome of judgement. This comes through sorrow for what we have done and seeking the Sacrament of Confession to right the relationship with God through God's grace. Who we are and where our relationship with God is at that moment of death is our final answer. In Confession, God forgives,

which means that He no longer holds what we have confessed against us in coming to His judgement. To fail at confessing and turning away from sin, we leave our sins in play for God's judgement. God's judgement is a verification of the choices we have made and let remain. For example, I can be a good and holy priest my entire life but choose to become a serial killer. If I am unrepentant of my crime, then I leave that in play for judgement. My being a good priest for x amount of years does not counterweight the sin that I end up clinging to upon death. God sees what comes before Him.

Come you Blessed of my Father

Those who die in a state of grace, that is free of unrepentant sin, will present that to God for judgement. God will see that we valued a relationship with Him over a relationship with sin. He will see our cooperation with His grace. Those found in such a manner will be given the Kingdom of Heaven as their eternal rest. That relationship with God will be the fulfillment of all desires. While we might die in that state of grace, we might still have to deal with the consequences of what our sins have wrought on others. Those consequences must be dealt with before we can enter into heaven.

From this comes purgatory. Purgatory is a final cleansing through justice. The same loving relationship that God offers us now purifies us as we go toward heaven. No soul in purgatory has any other final destination than heaven. At the end of time, eventually purgatory will cease to exist. Hence it is not a last thing (error I wrote from last time). The pain of purgatory is that the relationship with God has not come to its fullness, but the hope that it will and does drives on.

Too many times, people associate heaven with being able to do our favorite thing for eternity. Heaven becomes the ultimate self-indulgence. This is not heaven. If you are with your beloved doing something you like doing, what is of greater value: being with your beloved or the thing that you are doing? The eternal relationship with God is much more satisfying than eternal self-indulgence. Eternal self-indulgence is not appropriate to heaven. It is appropriate to hell.

Away from me you accursed

Hell is eternal separation from God. Many have talked about what hell is like. Fire. Demons poking at people. Eternal pain. Where does the pain come from? Does it come from pitchforks? I would imagine it comes from eternal futility that guts us. No thing that we choose over God can replace God. No favorite sin can sate us. If we are found at judgement to have chosen something over God, God lets us have it. We choose separation from God for something we deem greater, he will let us have it. For example: we are a culture enamored with sex. So having chosen the misuse of sex as of greater value than God, that is what you get. Great, huh? Think, though, of the emptiness of sexuality without self-giving love. You get the darkness of using people and being used by people as an object. You get that now for all eternity: to know nothing of self-giving love, to not even have it as an option any more, but to mindlessly chase after something that will never be found for eternity. The dissatisfaction and emptiness never go away. Having rejected God and His love in this life, we are empty of it for eternity. That is hell.