

1st Sunday of Advent
November 26th and 27th
The Four Last Things

In the Collect for today's Mass the Church prays:

Grant, your faithful, we pray, almighty God, the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming, so that gathered at his right hand they may be worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom.¹

This prayer speaks of the spiritual disposition we are to exercise in the present, expressed by the noun "resolve" so that in the future we will meet Christ with righteous deeds. This is so we will be gathered at his right hand as sharers in his heavenly kingdom.

This word resolve is used as a noun in this sentence and is paired with the verb "to run". In this context it means to run with a fixed determination. To live focused on that day when we will meet Christ.

It is this same idea that our Lord expresses in today's gospel where he speaks of this fixed determination by telling a story of comparison.

He likens his coming to a thief breaking into a home and concludes:

Therefore you must be ready, for the son of man is coming at an unexpected hour.²

Advent is the yearly exhortation, calling each of us to renew our resolve to live alertly and attentively in anticipation of Christ's coming.

One of the ways the Church inspires us to renew our resolve so we can live with focused determination is by having us understand and ponder the

"Four Last Things"

The Four Last Things are the two inevitable and two possible realities that we face at the end of our earthly lives. The two inevitable realities are death and judgment. The two possible realities are heaven and hell.

So let's begin by thinking about the two inevitable realities - death and judgment:

1. Death:

Death is the cessation of our present earthly lives, the moment of separation of our souls and bodies. Once dead, we cease to choose between good and evil: death irrevocably fixes our state for eternity.

¹ Collect for 1st Sunday of Advent: *Living with Christ*, page 135

² Matthew 24:42-44

Although death comes to us because of sin, not God's will, God has removed its terror for us and made it the path to eternal life. Because of Jesus' death and Resurrection St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that the last enemy to be destroyed is death.³

Death is our enemy but also our opportunity to enter into the fullness of heaven. Therefore we should remain in God's friendship and live each day as if it were our last. We should also ask God for the grace of a good and holy death.

2. Judgment:

The Scriptures is so clear on the inevitability of judgment. Here is the clearest verse in the Bible on this:

- **Hebrews 9:27:** "Human beings die only once, after which comes judgment."

What will we be judged for? On how we lived while in these earthly bodies. "At the evening of life", says the Catechism, we will each be judged on our love." (CCC 1022). And our love is a response to God's love, which was given to us in Christ.

Therefore the standard at the final judgment is Christ. Like life, judgment is Christocentric. "In the presence of Christ, who is Truth Himself" [Jn 14:6], "the truth of each person's relationship with God will be laid bare [cf. Jn 12:49]" (CCC 1039). "Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ"⁴

There are two dimensions to this judgment.

First, there is a particular and unchangeable judgment which follows immediately upon our deaths. Second, as the Creed affirms, there is a final and universal reckoning at the end of time when Christ "will come again".

As we are to be judged by God, we should ask for his mercy and help to put our lives in order, examine our consciences regularly and practise Confession.

3. Heaven:

Heaven is our eternal home where God gives us the vision of his face and shares his divine life with us. Scripture describes heaven as a city or kingdom where the saints enjoy the perfected creation and the reward they deserve.

³ 1 Corinthians 15:26

⁴ Kreeft, Peter. Catholic Christianity (p. 144). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.

Heaven is our home, our destiny, our fulfillment, our completion. Whatever else it will be, whatever else it will feel like, it will feel like home, for it is the place we were made for, designed for. Again to quote the Catechism:

“Heaven is the . . . fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness”⁵

Those who die in God’s grace either go straight to heaven or first enter purgatory, a place of purification for sins and for reparation.

We can truly hope for heaven since it is God’s desire for us. We should ask him to prepare us for heaven even if we face sufferings on the way.

It is good to make the saints our companions through prayer and to pray for the holy souls in purgatory.

Speaking of Purgatory, these are words St. Monica spoke to St. Augustine just before her death. Monica was Augustine’s mother.

‘This only I ask of you that you should remember me at the altar of God’ (Confessions, 11. 27).

Monica's words affirmed her belief in purgatory, the state of those who die in God's friendship but who still need to be fully cleansed (through Christ's merits) from the effects of their sins and to grow spiritually before enjoying the final vision of God. Through their prayers for the dead (attested at least since the second century) and celebration of the Eucharist for the dead (attested at least since the third century), Christians expressed their loving concern for their dear ones who had died but who remained united with them in God. Praying for the dead was to remain a typical feature of Eastern and Western worship. The words of Augustine's dying mother became perhaps the loveliest witness from all times to this.

St. Catherine of Genoa says that although purgatory is incomparably painful because we see all the horror of our own sins, yet it is incomparably joyful because God is with us there, and we are learning to endure his truth, his light. It is also joyful because all those in purgatory have already passed the particular judgment and are assured of their eventual entrance into heaven.⁶

We can liken purgatory to heaven’s porch, or heaven’s incubator, or heaven’s wash room. Unlike heaven or hell, purgatory is only temporary. Purgatory takes away the temporal punishment still due for our sins after our Baptism, faith, and repentance have already saved us from the eternal punishment due to our sins, that is, hell. Remember there are only two eternal destinies, not three; heaven or hell, being with God or without him.⁷

⁵ CCC.1024

⁶ Kreeft, Peter. Catholic Christianity (p. 149). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Kreeft, Peter. Catholic Christianity (p. 149). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.

4. Hell:

Hell is the eternal loss of the vision of God, and the place of punishment of damned souls, the devil and his angels.

It is the choice of evil and lack of repentance before the end of our earthly lives that leads to our damnation. After the fall, hell would have been the just end of the human race. However, God in his great love has offered us salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ.

We should ask God to save us from the ‘fires of hell’ (c.f. Mt 18:9; Rev 20:14) as he himself desires. As St. Paul tells us:

God desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth⁸

Hell is a real possibility because our will is free. If we look into the implications of the doctrine of free will, we will see the doctrine of hell there as a necessary part of the package. Our salvation consists essentially in union with God, spiritual marriage to God, a love-relationship with God. And love by its essence is free, a free choice of the will. God has freely done his part in loving us into existence by creating us and then redeeming us from our sin at infinite cost to himself, on the Cross. But if we do not freely do our part, we cannot attain this end of a love-union with God. God cannot force us to love; if freedom is forced, it is no longer freedom; and if it is free, it is no longer forced.

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’⁹

As we begin this Advent season may I invite you to ponder the “Four Last Things”. Turn to the Catechism and read article 12: “I believe in life everlasting” where they are described in detail. It is only as we ponder the inevitability of death and judgment and the possible realities of heaven and hell that we will stay awake and pray:

Grant, your faithful, we pray, almighty God, the resolve to run forth to meet your Christ with righteous deeds at his coming, so that gathered at his right hand they may be worthy to possess the heavenly kingdom.

⁸ The Holy Bible. (2006). (Revised Standard Version; Second Catholic Edition, 1 Ti 2:4). San Francisco: Ignatius Press.

⁹ Kreeft, Peter. Catholic Christianity (pp. 146-147). Ignatius Press. Kindle Edition.