

The Last Judgment

Michaelmas – The Feast of St. Michael the Archangel and All Angels, September 30, 2018
Church of the Ascension, Chicago
The Rev. Patrick Raymond

Saint Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle; be our protection against the wickedness and snares of the devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray: and do thou, O Prince of the heavenly host, by the power of God, thrust into hell satan and all the evil spirits who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen. – Leonine Prayer to St. Michael

Almighty God, our Father in heaven, before whom live all who die in the Lord:
Receive our *brother* into the courts of your heavenly dwelling place. Let *his* heart and soul now ring out in joy to you, O Lord, the living God, and the God of those who live. This we ask through Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

– From the *Vigil* before a funeral, Book of Common Prayer, p. 466

We sinners beseech you to hear us, Lord Christ: That it may please you to deliver the soul of your servant from the power of evil, and from eternal death,

We beseech you to hear us, good Lord.

That it may please you mercifully to pardon all *his* sins,

We beseech you to hear us, good Lord. ¹

Those words are taken from the ‘Ministry at the Time of Death’ -- a rite in our Prayer Book also known in other traditions or at other times as the ‘Last Rites’ or ‘Extreme Unction.’

Just over two weeks ago, I administered the rite to a dying man nearby whose own priest was unable to be there. The family members who had gathered were Episcopalian, Roman Catholic and Southern Baptist, but in that room at that time they were all of one mind and heart. They all wanted a Christian minister to speak with compassion and with authority about our shared Christian hope for life with God after death.

That it may please you to grant him a place of refreshment and everlasting blessedness,

We beseech you to hear us, good Lord.

*That it may please you to give him joy and gladness in your kingdom,
with your saints in light,*

We beseech you to hear us, good Lord. ¹

Asking for a priest at the time of death rarely happens in our time. The instance of a few weeks ago was only the seventh or eighth time, in thirty-one years of ordained ministry, that I have administered Last Rites. More often than not in our day, the spiritual realm and the spiritual care of the dying are kept at bay by the hope of yet another medical intervention that will keep the body going. We instinctively imagine that by contemplating or speaking of death and its meaning we might jinx our enduring hope for a cure.

When death does come, we who are left behind are often buried by logistical and legal matters, with little time for grief or prayer or asking the Big Questions. At the memorial service, often weeks later, we strive to remember and share the most important achievements and the most endearing characteristics of the one who has died. We want their earthly lives to be seen in a favorable light. More often than not, we forgot about or neglected the traditional anointing of the body. We dismissed or only muddled through the historical Christian responsibility and practice of praying for the soul's salvation. More often than not the priest was not called to gather with loved ones and to pray:

Deliver your servant, O Sovereign Lord Christ, from all evil, and set *him* free from every bond; that *he* may rest with all your saints in the eternal habitations ...

Depart, O Christian soul, out of this world;

In the Name of God the Father Almighty who created you; In the Name of Jesus Christ who redeemed you; In the Name of the Holy Spirit who sanctifies you.²

This language would have been much more common and timely and poignant for the patients of the *hôtel-dieu* -- or hospital -- built in Beaune, France, in the mid-15th century, a time of plague and famine. The patron who built the hospital stipulated a variety of innovations. A morgue, for instance, was designed into the hospital, so that bodies would not have to be transported to another location. A back door of the morgue opened directly into the cemetery. It was apparently the door by which most patients left the hospital.

Better known today is the Beaune hospital chapel, for which the Belgian artist Rogier van der Weyden was commissioned to paint a massive altarpiece, over seven feet tall and sixteen feet wide when fully opened. It depicts the Last Judgment and it is still visited in our time by over 300,000 tourists every year. Important detail from the Beaune altarpiece is included on the cover of this morning's bulletin. You may want to contemplate the image as I tell you about another innovation in the design of the hospital at Beaune.

A main ward there that held thirty beds was built immediately adjacent to the chapel. From any one of those 30 beds the patients could see through a pierced screen into the chapel and gaze upon the Last Judgment. From any bed, the mostly dying patients of Beaune hospital would have viewed the requiem masses for their fellow patients. They would have heard the words of Christ from the requiem Gospel: *the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out*—



those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation. (John 5:28-29)

In mid-15th-century France it would have been widely believed that St. Michael the Archangel was the chief icon and manifestation of God's Last Judgment. As in many other artworks of the day, Michael was depicted in the Beaune altarpiece holding a scale – a scale that measured the totality of a human life. In the detail that is shown on the bulletin cover, you can see one of countless souls rising up from the grave to be judged. What you can't see here are the extreme ends of the altarpiece where the souls already weighed in the scales are bound for the gates of heaven to the left or on the right to the fires of hell.

The medieval art historian Barbara Lane explains that one extraordinary feature of the Beaune altarpiece is that *"the central focus ... is St. Michael rather than the judging Christ."* To be sure, Christ reigns in glory from heaven over the head of St. Michael. But:

"Garbed in a gleaming white alb and an elaborate cope of red and gold brocade, the archangel dominates the foreground of the center panel. His alb comprises the largest area of white in the painting, hypnotically attracting the viewer's glance. Bridging the gap between the earthly and celestial worlds, he is the only holy figure who occupies the earthly realm ... he takes a small step forward, as if to enter the viewer's space, and his piercing gaze directly out of the picture seems to imply that the one to be judged is the worshiper himself." ³

That piercing gaze of St. Michael – it's what led me to include him on this morning's bulletin cover. That piercing gaze was rendered by the artist with the intention of turning our own contemplation to our own Last Judgment.

In the short term we may want to turn our gaze to those scales in Michael's hand. In what ways may our own lives be hanging in the balance now? In those scales may be found not only our greatest achievements and our most sordid debacles but also our countless small daily gestures for good or ill that may also be templates here on earth of heaven or hell.

And then back to that piercing gaze of Michael, reminding us that sooner or later one of those 30 beds will be ours. Make sure you've let your loved ones know what to do when your hour comes: *"Call the priest. Tell him or her to come quickly. Urge him or her not to neglect the prayers"*:

Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech you, a sheep of your own fold, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive him into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light. Amen. ⁴

¹ 1979 Book of Common Prayer, page 463.

² 1979 Book of Common Prayer, page 464.

³ "Requiem aeternam dona eis": The Beaune "Last Judgment" and the Mass of the Dead," **Barbara G. Lane**, *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1989).

⁴ 1979 Book of Common Prayer, page 465.