

The Apostle's Creed Part IV: "From Thence He Shall Come to Judge the Quick and the Dead"

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Romans 2: 1-3, 6

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Today we are on part four of my series of sermons on the Apostle's Creed. So far in this series, I have talked about the phrase *I believe in*. I have talked about the phrase *God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth*, and about the phrase *Jesus Christ His Only Son our Lord*. Today, for part four, I am talking about what it means that Jesus will come again to judge the quick and the dead. While I could probably preach a hundred sermons on this phrase, mercifully you will not be hearing a hundred sermons this morning. Instead, I will limit my remarks to one sermon in which I say three things about this phrase.

The first thing I want to say about this phrase is that the belief in a God who in Christ will come again is a belief in a God who acts through history. None of us know what will happen in history in our lifetimes or in our children's lifetimes. We do know we have many things to be concerned about, however. The planet is getting hotter and will grow increasingly hostile to our survival if we do not take action to reverse course. An even more serious concern than that is the proliferation of nuclear weapons which with each passing day become more and more likely to get into the hands of people who are not afraid to use them—and as if that isn't enough, the world is also becoming overpopulated at an alarming rate, and we aren't getting any more land or any more water, or any more food. But while we have a lot of things to be concerned about, what we are promised is that no matter what tomorrow holds, God holds tomorrow.

Time and again I have read about and heard about people saying that for them participating in worship at church and fellowshiping with other Christians at church has some

real therapeutic benefits. In twenty-first century America, perhaps the highest compliment you can pay to any religious community would be to call it “therapeutic.” But while your experience in the Christian community may have therapeutic benefits, what we are not doing here is trying to replicate what you would receive from the therapist’s office. We are not even trying to replicate group therapy. As people of the Christian faith we believe that the events we read about in the paper have as much to do with our faith as whatever healing we experience that goes on in here. We believe in a God that acts not only in our own personal lives but even in the events of history—and one day God will bring an end to history. You know, I am aware that about every few years or so, you hear about some self-appointed prophet who declares that the end is near. They are so sure that Jesus is coming back at this very date in history, and they take one hand, and with that hand they open their bible and point to a few verses and then they take their other hand and they point to some events in the newspaper, and they say “Aha, aha, look at how these are about the same thing!” Now frankly, my friends, I usually have very little patience for that kind of thing. I usually have very little patience for it because in the first place, Jesus said only God knows when the end is coming, and that he doesn’t even know the day and the hour--and if he doesn’t even know, I really don’t think some self-appointed prophet knows. And secondly, there seems to be something awfully narcissistic about believing all the prophecies in the bible have to be about us, and they have to be about the people living in our time, because, naturally, we are the most important people who ever were. But though I have little patience for this kind of speculation, I have no problem with this view of history as the story about God. History will end with God’s triumph. I don’t know when history it will end, and

I don't know exactly how it will end, but I know who will be there when it ends. I do not know what tomorrow holds, but I know who holds tomorrow.

Second, the Apostle's Creed tells us not just that Christ will come back, but that when he does he will stand in judgment. And what we are assured of in this creed is that everyone will be judged. To judge the quick and the dead means to judge the living and the dead, and the living and the dead includes everyone. The Apostle's Creed does not just say that Christ will judge non-believers, or Christ will judge the wicked, but everyone will be judged. Those who are in Christ will not be condemned, in fact, all of our sins will be forgiven. But having our sins be forgiven does not mean we won't have to face our sins. Forgiveness does not mean avoidance.

I don't know if you've heard of *The Milgram Obedience Experiment*. But it was an experiment in which volunteers were all told that they were taking part in a study to test the effects of punishment on learning. And each volunteer who was told this was sitting in one room at a shock generator with buttons to push that would send electric impulses. The voltage would start out at a low level of say twenty volts and then gradually increase to something like 400 volts. So there was a person sitting at this shock generator and there was another person strapped to a chair sitting in the next room—and the volunteer at the shock generator would ask the person in the next room a question, and every time the person in the next room strapped to that chair got a wrong answer they were to be shocked as the volunteer sitting at the generator turned on a switch. Now, with each wrong answer the shocks were to get more and more intense, increasing in electric voltage for each wrong reply. Now, as I say, the volunteer sitting at the shock generator was told that it was an experiment to test the effects of punishment on learning, but that actually wasn't true. You see all of this was fake. There were

no actual shocks and the person in the next room who was giving all these wrong answers was in on the experiment. The real experiment was about the volunteer, it was about the guy pressing all the buttons. It was to see how far they were willing to go in shocking someone just because someone who was an authority, someone who wore a scientist's white lab coat told them to do it. So, the experiment was to test how far someone would go in following orders, and what Milgram found was, well, shocking. What he found was that two out of three people would follow the commands of the experimenter all the way to the bitter end, all the way to the level of shocks that were labelled *extremely dangerous*, and all the way to the point that they heard the guy strapped to the chair screaming and shouting "Let me out! Let me out!"

Well, this experiment by Milgram happened at Yale University in the early sixties, and people in the years since, have asked themselves why people have been willing to do such an awful thing to another person. And they have come up with two answers. One answer is that they increased the voltage gradually. If you asked someone out of the blue to apply a lethal shock to someone they won't do it. But if they know they've already shocked them a little, and then a little more and then a little more, then that's another matter. And the other answer is that it was easier to shock when the person strapped to the chair and screaming was sitting in the next room. But here's the thing, when the experiment was changed to have the shocker and the shockee sitting in the same room together, things changed. People didn't obey nearly as much. When we have to face the people that we harm, it gets much harder to harm them. And not only does it get harder to harm, it also gets harder to neglect. How many of you have been moved to give to some charity like the *March of Dimes* or *Bread for the World* or *Oxfam* not because you've read some newsletter but because you saw a picture of a child who is sick

or suffering and you've said to yourself "I have to face this child I am neglecting if I choose to neglect them"? Because all of us are sinners, all of us will have to face what we have both done and left undone. And that is ultimately what the cross is all about. Remember the old spiritual, *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?* We were there, weren't we? We were there with Pilate who washed his hands of responsibility. We were there with the fickle crowds who loved him one minute and chanted "Crucify Him!" the next. We were there with Peter who denied him. We were there with Judas who sold him out. We were there with the disciples who abandoned him. We were there with the soldiers who played games while he died. We were there when they crucified our Lord.

The third thing I want to say is that because God will stand in judgment over us, it is not our job to judge. Our job is to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to care for the sick, the visit the prisoner and the lonely, and our job is not to decide who is worthy of our care and who is not. You know, people who are not parents, I think have a hard time understanding this, but when you are a parent, there is nothing worse than someone else trying to tell you how to parent. I remember when Sophia was a baby, I brought her to a Presbytery meeting because I was a proud new dad and I wanted everyone to see my beautiful daughter. You know how you are when you are a new parent and you're so proud and you want to show your baby off to the whole world. Well, I can remember some person I had never met before in my life, and never seen before in my life came up to me and said "You shouldn't bring your baby to these meetings, there's a lot of germs here and she could get sick." Can you believe someone would actually do that? I wanted to say "Why don't you leave the parenting to me, thank you very much. I don't even know who you are." Well, I tend to think that's how God feels whenever we

try to do God's job for him. Leave the judging to God. Not one of us is perfect enough to be in a position to judge. You know one time, I was preaching a sermon on being perfect and I said to the congregation, "Now as you all know none of us are perfect, in fact if any of you think you're perfect, please stand up." Well, no one stood up, except this one man. This one rather senior gentleman in the very back stood up. Well, I was a little taken aback by this and I said, "Now, surely sir, you don't think you're perfect do you." He said "No, but I'm standing here for my wife's first husband." So, you know, there's that. But none of us are perfect, so none of us are in a position to judge. Sometimes I hear people saying "Don't judge!" and what they mean by that is that we should never call anything wrong. Well, I don't know what the point of having a bible is at all if we can't call anything *wrong*. I certainly don't know what my profession is about if we can't ever call anything *wrong*. Not judging does not mean we can't ever call anything *wrong*. What it means is that it's not our job to decide who is worthy of what, or who is going where. That's God's job. It is for us to focus on caring, and welcoming, and visiting, and sharing, and to leave the rest to God.

Next week, for my final sermon in this series, I will be talking about the holy catholic church. Until then, abide in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.