

## **Eternal justice**

*He will come again to judge the living and the dead.*

Romans 2:12 – 16, 2 Timothy 4:1 – 5, Matthew 12:33 – 37

In June 1970, two people were murdered at Pukekawa, South of Auckland. They were of course Harvey and Jeannette Crewe. The following year Arthur Allan Thomas was convicted of their murder. While that conviction was quashed on appeal, Mr Thomas was again convicted of their murders and spent a total of nine in jail as a convicted murderer. Finally his name was cleared and he was released in December 1979 after being pardoned and awarded \$950,000 in compensation for his jail time and the loss of the use of the farm.

Now just imagine if we had the death penalty in New Zealand. Arthur Allan Thomas would have been wrongly killed.

It is estimated around 4% of people who receive the death penalty in the US are wrongly convicted! That means that every 25<sup>th</sup> person who dies is most likely to be innocent.

Btw the majority of those on death row just happen to be black or Hispanic or poor or mentally unwell! Justice is slanted in the US and in our country too I think.

Arthur Allan Thomas spent so much time in jail because of a travesty of justice by those who should be above reproach – the police – and because a subsequent judge and newspaper editor weren't willing to challenge them.

While New Zealand might be relatively honest; our systems are not corruption free. We need to fight and pray for justice for all in the here and now.

But we can completely trust our God to deliver justice in every sense of the word in the future. When Jesus comes back again he will establish his shalom, his justice, peace and righteousness here on earth. There will be no more injustice of any kind from that point onwards.

I wonder what would have happened if I was on the jury at either of Mr Thomas's trials. Would I have convicted him? Those of you who have been on jury service know how difficult it is to judge a person's innocence or guilt. If I was ever chosen for jury service I'd be scared stiff of mucking it up.

Scripture tells us we are not to judge others in the normal course of events. "Do not judge lest ye be judged" is a frequently quoted passage. Of course it doesn't prohibit discernment. We are to use our nous. If we think someone or something is dodgy, it often is and we should listen to our gut. Often it is not our gut at all but the Holy Spirit.

The reality is that most of us are quite good at judging. I often sit watching the news, thinking that so and so is wrong to do that or say that, knowing full well that the sound bites we get often distort the truth beyond recognition. Or I will see a person do something in the street and look on disapprovingly, not having any idea

what stresses or strains that person might be living with. Even though I am unfit to judge, it doesn't prevent me doing just that.

I've also recently realised that the refusal to forgive, conscious or unconscious, is a form of judgement. If I am holding something against a person, some kind of resentment or grudge, it really means I don't think that person is worthy of forgiveness. I think I am better at God's job than he is and I don't trust him enough to allow him to do the judging.

Another thing about human judgement; I am good at judging others for doing the same kind of things I do. I judge someone for being intolerant when I am intolerant of their intolerance. I judge someone for their impatience when I lose my own rag with Vestry. I judge someone for .... all kinds of things, when I am the worst of all sinners.

Just as well isn't it that Jesus is coming again to judge the living and the dead? He is the only one who is fit to do so. Jesus will judge on behalf of God the Father and Jesus' judgement will be completely fair. I want to consider some aspects of that judgement now. In judgement Jesus will set in place God's eternal justice. That judgement will be the time of accountability for every single human being – alive or having already experienced the first death. The nature of that judgement will be completely just, it will be made with complete insight into all circumstances and it will be merciful.

Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. So what is judgement? Jesus comes down from heaven, to earth, to bring God's judgement, that is to establish his Kingdom here. God's judgement is not just about sorting out the do-gooders from the 'do-badders.' It is far more than that. Jesus is proclaiming God's lawful right to make everything just as it should be, as it was designed to be right from the beginning. Jesus comes to bring judgement and a very real part of that is God's shalom. Removing what is evil means that everything that is left will be good and pure and righteous. The end result of judgement is that God's Kingdom will come in all its fullness.

Okay that's the end result. But what does the process mean for human beings? Judgement is for us the time of accountability; when we face Jesus and have to account for what we've done with what he gave us. We know that good will be rewarded and evil will be punished, even if we don't know what that reward and punishment will look like in the end.

The people that Jesus was hardest on, during his physical lifetime, were the religious lot, the Pharisees. They made rules and didn't stick to them. Detailed systems were more important than a relationship with the living God. So religion became more about how things appeared than what was going on in the heart. We call this legalism. The religious lot set themselves up as judges and were not accountable to anyone. Jesus gave them heaps for it and promised judgement. See the parable of Dives and Lazarus in Luke 16.

Each one of us will face the time of accountability or judgement. What will that be like for us? What can we expect from God? How will Jesus judge on his behalf?

1. It is clear that his judgement will be infallible or completely just. The Lord does know intimately the circumstances of each person on earth. He knows our genetic makeup and how we were conditioned as children. He knows if the choices we made were really genuine choices or if we were forced into things we didn't actively decide on. The Lord knows whose heart is towards him and who is heading away and whether or not we'd keep heading in that same direction. God is the only one who does. He is the only one we can trust to judge with complete fairness.
2. The Lord has complete insight into every aspect of our lives.
  - a. We can see what is on the outside. That does reveal some things. We know that a good tree bears good fruit. The Lord will judge by our actions
  - b. We can also hear our own words and the words of others. What we say matters. We will be judged on our words.
  - c. We cannot see what is in the heart of others; often we do not know what is inside our own hearts. We will be judged by our hearts.

Jesus words in Matthew 12 tell us that all these things will be taken into account on judgement day. A friend of mine interprets the passage and the parable of the talents something like this. Each one of us is created to be a unique human being with a specific personality, talents, abilities etc. Alison Heslop was created to be the best Alison she could be. John Green was created to be the best John he could be. The judgement of our deeds, words and heart will be based on whether or not we were the best person we could be given our specific gifts and challenges. It is only the Lord who has complete insight into the plans and purposes he had for us in our creation.

3. The Lord is also merciful beyond anything we experience here on earth. We only need to look at the story of the woman caught in adultery. Jesus did not condemn her but caused the accusers to face their own sin. Romans 2:4 tells us that the Lord is kind, tolerant and patient. Karl Barth talks about Jesus as our advocate. He has intervened on our behalf in his life, his death, his ascension and in the prayers he offers for us from heaven now. His intervention is absolute when he comes in judgement to set us free for ever.

So we can trust in God's judgement as being infallible, insightful and merciful.

What is to be our response to what we know of God's judgement when Jesus comes again? What is our duty now? How then shall we live?

First of all we need to be ready for Jesus to come again. We need to keep our own consciences clear; keep short accounts with the Lord. The parables about wise virgins in Matthew 25 remind us of that. We live in hope – the day is coming when the Lord will come and put everything to rights. (Btw don't be fooled when people talk about blood moons or other amazing signs that indicate Jesus' imminent return or cataclysmic events which will follow. The Bible tells us that no-one knows when Jesus will return. Mt 24:36, Mk 13:32)

Secondly we need to be who God has called us to be – at whatever stage of life we find ourselves in. “Usefulness does not necessarily mean a life of energy and action; a person who is physically helpless may by prayer unleash a floodtide of energy into life; a person for whom the days of action are past can still be a focus of spiritual strength and light.”<sup>1</sup> Wherever God has placed you, you are to be the best you can be.

Thirdly we need to be helping others to be ready. Paul urges Timothy to carry out his ministry (2 Tim 4:2). Ministry, whether it be physically involved in things or not, always involves encouraging others to be the best they can be. That may be direct Christian ministry or it may be volunteering with Aged Concern or the Richmond Information Centre. It may be donating money or praying for others. It will always involve helping others to be who the Lord has called them to be.

I am so pleased that I am not called to be a judge or a lawyer. I’d swing from wanting everyone to go free, to being judgemental and harsh. Would I have convicted Arthur Allan Thomas?

Praise God that Jesus, the One who is infallible, insightful and merciful is coming again to put all things to rights. We need not be afraid of this. The only one who has any right to be against us, is for us. As God’s children, we know we are unworthy but we also allow Jesus, King of the world, to make us clean and to transform us more and more into his likeness.

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, *The Plain Man Looks at the Apostles’ Creed*, 201