

Rehearsing for Judgment Day

December 10, 2017 – Second Sunday of Advent

By Rev. David Poecking

Readings: Isaiah 40.1-5, 9-11; 2 Peter 3.8-14; Mark 1.1-8

Missing the Mark

At a local Protestant seminary, I once sat in on a post-ordination seminar with a professor notorious for his opposition to same-sex marriage. In an *apologia* before the students, he patiently explained that homosexual activity fails to reach the goal God sets for us in human nature: It fails to establish a permanent bond across the human sexual differentiation into male and female, and thus also fails to orient the institution of marriage toward hospitality to all men and women, and especially to children.

One of the students protested, “But that’s crazy! Anyone who believed that would also have to believe . . . even divorce is wrong!” She suddenly swiveled in her chair and looked at me, a Catholic priest, and conceded, “Oh. You, at least, might be consistent.”

She had a point. The neighborhood gay couple differs little from the remarried divorcés, who in turn differ little from the woman caught in adultery, the wife popping birth control pills, or even the half-hearted husband and father. They have this in common: They’ve missed their goal, they’ve failed to achieve the purpose of their sexual or family life.

Each one might resent association with the others. The half-hearted husband scorns infidelity as a worse sin; the adulteress laments the ingratitude of the pill-popping wife with a good marriage. The unmarried fornicators believe they haven’t cheapened marriage as the divorcés did. The divorcés stand aloof from the sodomy of the gay couple, while the gays mourn the bad fathering they see among the half-hearted straights. We’ve all failed in one way or another, and we only compound our failure when we discount it compared to others’. However much one sort of sinners may be scandalized by the second, they do not thereby escape judgment: “The earth and everything done on it will be found out.”

On the day of the Lord, failure matters more than *why* one fails. The archer doesn’t score more points for overshooting the target than for undershooting it, nor more for missing more narrowly than another archer whose aim was even wider. *Pace* Leo Tolstoy, who might insist each one sins in his own way, from God’s perspective, the decisive fact is *that* they have sinned.

Yet our Lord intends neither that we should fail in the end, nor that our failure should be erased by discarding the target. Instead, our Lord intends that through the practice of moral discipline and confession, we should learn to aim true and strike the target he has set out for us.

The Target

As it happens, ours is a precise target – so precise as to be simply the bull’s eye, Jesus Christ. John the Baptist and countless other prophets and preachers called God’s people to repentance for the forgiveness of their sins, but only the Lord raises us to our true goal. John the Evangelist draws the contrast in terms of baptism: John the Baptist dips us in repentance, but Jesus dips us in the Holy Spirit, an immersion in the perfect and perfectly shared life and love of the Trinitarian Communion, Father, Son, and Spirit.

So James the Epistler asks, “What sort of persons ought you to be?” Through the gospels, too, the Lord Jesus is not shy about setting a divinely high standard for his disciples. He told the rich young ruler that perfection required him to sell all that he had, give it to the poor, and follow him. When a lawyer wanted to know the limits of neighborly love, Jesus expanded it to include foreigners. In his Sermon on the Mount, he called for a wholehearted, deeply interior obedience to the commandments: “Every one who looks lustfully . . . has already committed adultery”; and “Every one angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment” for murder.

To be holy as Christ intends, it is not enough to avoid the most obvious, outward violation of the Ten Commandments. Instead, extrapolating from the Sermon on the Mount, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* elaborates in 475 paragraphs (§§2083-2557) how features of contemporary life fall short of Christ.

With respect to a single phrase, “You shall have no other gods before me,” the *Catechism* identifies superstition, idolatry, divination, horoscopes, astrology, palm-reading, omen-interpretation, clairvoyance, mediums, magic, sorcery, Spiritism, irreligion, sacrilege, simony, atheism, and agnosticism as sins against the commandment. It suggests how each sin may be familiar to us. We might, for example, misunderstand the efficacy of prayer as something magical; or elevate the importance of race, money, or government above God; or take interest in secret spiritual powers; or treat spiritual goods as ours to use. Let the reader examine his conscience carefully. Most will discover more than just a “spot or blemish.” Few of us even come close to the target, to say nothing of the bull’s eye.

And those are just the line items! There remains the larger project of following Jesus: of forming one’s conscience, of coming to an awareness of the needs of others, of denying oneself in order to place the Lord and others first, and ultimately of living in conformity to the Beatitudes, anticipating the new creation – “the new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.”

Hitting the Bull’s Eye

It may seem an impossible goal, but the God of Jesus Christ achieves wonders. Of old, Isaiah and his fellow prophets envisioned the coming of a Messiah who would exalt Judah, Jerusalem, and Mount Zion, and vindicate her people.

They understood King Cyrus of Persia as a spectacular fulfillment of the prophecy. Though a Gentile, he turned his imperial power toward the restoration of the Jews to Judah from their exile. What had seemed a political, religious, and economic impossibility suddenly became imaginable. Metaphorically speaking, Cyrus lowered the mountains and filled in the valleys for the Jewish people to parade home on a smooth highway.

The Jewish lawyers and scribes of the late sixth century B.C. recognized the story as God’s work, divinely inspired. But they guaranteed its incorporation into the bible because they believed it carried a message to subsequent generations. The vision of Isaiah and the restoration under Cyrus were tokens of God’s power. If Cyrus’ earthly majesty could pave over obstacles for the return of the Jews to Judah, then how much more gloriously might God come to his people!

Thus the Church invokes Isaiah’s prophecy as an anticipation of Christ’s power to save. He is the Messiah who expiates all guilt, who brings an end to indenture. He comes in power. But instead of parading down the

smooth highway, his people are asked to make it smooth, to make their rugged hearts plain, as if they themselves are the highway on which the Lord reveals himself.

And so we return to the perfection demanded of us, but not without hope. Our Lord does not wish us to perish. We are not like fallen angels, damned in an instant for all eternity. In our weak condition as subjects of space and time, God finds an opportunity for our salvation. When we pray daily for the coming of God's kingdom, he deigns to answer our prayer not by hastening toward the dissolution of the world by fire, but instead by patiently and protractedly turning us toward himself.

The Archery Teacher

For this great Messiah, of whom Cyrus the Great was merely a shadowy projection, comes not only as the God who makes and unmakes all things with his strong arm. In an oxymoronic twist of analogies, the Messiah comes also as a shepherd to his flock – carefully gathering his lambs, carrying them against his chest.

It's an unflattering image for us. My personal experience herding sheep was mercifully brief, but those few days were more than enough to teach me how frustratingly stupid sheep are, and also dirty, smelly, and irritating in countless ways. Apart from their wool, their only virtue is that they huddle together when frightened, and even that virtue they occasionally manage to convert to a vice, as when frightened by the toot of an oncoming train, they huddle together on the tracks in front of it.

All the more reason for the shepherd to be patient and gentle, and thus our Messiah shepherds us. He will not allow us to be crushed by the oncoming train of our own habitual sins, but will instead drive us along, to the right and to the left, until we learn his ways and follow him voluntarily and with confidence.

If judgment day must surprise us, if the day of the Lord must “come like a thief,” we can yet be ready for it. We are instructed to prepare. We can't know when the day will come, but we can rehearse for it.

Nearly two years ago, in short piece for *Ethika Politika* entitled “[Christ Tears off Our Scales](#),” I had occasion to describe how Christ tutors us preparation for judgment. There, borrowing from C. S. Lewis the analogy of sin as dragon scales, per the character of Eustace Scrubb in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, I observed how Christ prepares us first by teaching us to claw at our own scales, as futile as it seems, and then removes them himself.

Here, I've used the analogy of sin as target-missing, for which the Greek word is the New Testament's most common expression for sin. If I extend the biblical analogy, then Christ is our archery teacher. He sets out the target, observes our failure, corrects our aim, refines our posture. And he asks us to repeat, practice, rehearse, again and again, until our holiness is no longer merely aspirational, but we live every moment aiming for God.

For our principal exercise, our Lord bequeathed to us the sacrament of Penance. Thus we rehearse for judgment day. Like sheep who learn to follow their shepherd, like archers who learn their craft through long practice, we through Penance learn to turn from our sins and toward Jesus.

By examining our consciences, by the lengthy elaboration of the *Catechism* on the commandments, by comparing our own decisions and conduct with the example of the Lord, we shine the bright light of Christ on ourselves. It grieves us to see how we fail, but our grief is itself a sign of contrition and health, a grace of God. We resolve to stop our errant ways and follow our shepherd. We receive penances that orient us toward the proper remedies, by which we fill in the valleys and lower the mountains of our souls.

But perhaps most importantly, we also rehearse forgiveness. The sacrament of Penance reaches its climax with the priest's prayer of absolution, a foretaste of that last day when our final victory will be to accept the forgiveness for our failures, and enter into the fullness of divine life and love for which we have been prepared. Come, Lord Jesus.

Fr. David Poecking is pastor of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Church in Carnegie, Pennsylvania. He contributed a guide to using the Ten Commandments for confession to the collection [Thoughts and Meditations for Ash Wednesday](#).

For Further Reading

["Benedict XVI on the Pedagogical Value of Sacramental Confession"](#)

Catechism of the Catholic Church, [##1020-1041](#)

Rev. Patrick J. McHugh, ["Judgment and the Laws of the Universe"](#)

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, ["Examinations of Conscience"](#)

In Short . . .

- ***Our sinful failures matter more than why we fail; from God's perspective, the decisive fact is that we have sinned.***
- ***Our Lord intends neither that we should fail in the end, nor that our failure should be erased by discarding the target.***
- ***Instead, our Lord intends that through the practice of moral discipline and confession, we should learn to aim true and strike the target he has set out for us.***
- ***When we pray daily for the coming of God's kingdom, he answers our prayer by patiently and protractedly turning us toward himself.***
- ***We are instructed to prepare for judgment day; we can't know when it will come, but we can rehearse for it.***
- ***When examining our consciences, it grieves us to see how we fail, but our grief is itself a sign of contrition and health, a grace of God.***