

*The books are opened then to all, A record truly telling
What each has done, both great and small, When he on earth was dwelling,
And ev'ry heart be clearly seen, And all be known as they have been
In thoughts and words and actions.*

The hearts of all people will be open to all. It's not just the hymn that says this. It is taught in Scripture. We heard it last Sunday in the reading from Ecclesiastes, it's the last verse of the whole book: "**God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil**" (Eccl 12:14). St. Paul says in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: "**We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil**" (2 Cor 5:10). Finally, in the verse that serves as the basis for the hymns stanza, the apostle John writes in Revelation: "**I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened.... And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done**" (Rev 20:12).

The hearts of all people will be open to all creatures. Our Lord is the Judge. That is what we confess in the creeds. At His coming in glory with all His angels, He will sit on His glorious throne, and those who are alive and all the dead having been raised will appear before Him. It is all in the public record. No need for a Freedom of Information Act to see the evidence here. The basis of the judgment is no private thing, just between you and Jesus. Everything is made known to everybody. *The books are opened then to all.*

If that does not strike fear into your heart, if that does not cause you to re-examine your life and repent, be warned. *The day is surely drawing near.* It is coming. And if you think your deeds will get you off the hook, remember that our Lord judges not only actions, but the heart. So often people will excuse their sin saying, "God knows my heart." They do not know what they are saying. Jesus says that the heart is the problem, "**What comes out of a person is what defies him. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person**" (Mk 7:20-23). When you are wrestling with what to do, whether something is right or wrong, whether you should do it, say it, think it, or not, if the advice you are given is, "Follow your heart," you can be sure that advice is not of God. We look to God's Word for instruction and guidance.

So consider for a moment all that you have done just in your heart. All the evil thoughts about your neighbor. Your lust for them when God has not given him or her to you as your spouse. Your hatred of them, where you can't, you won't, think of a single good thing about them, but simply stoke resentment for them. Your desire for the things your neighbor has, and a refusal to be content with what God has given you. Every crass joke, every disgusting thought. Consider that appearing not only before the almighty Judge, but also before the person you hate or hurt, your parents, your spouse, your best friend, your pastor, and every other person who has ever lived.

If you have this understanding as the basis of the Judgment, you won't be surprised that this whole topic doesn't make the list of what people like to think about. That's really nothing new. The most well-known theologian of the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas, in his commentary on the Apostles' Creed, when he gets to the part about the Lord coming to judge the living and the dead, he has absolutely nothing about joy or happiness. Rather he goes on to list four reasons to fear this judgment, and he provides a four-fold solution: do good works, go to confession after which, "in all severity make satisfaction for your sins to take away eternal punishment," give alms, and love God and your neighbor. That is to say, the solution for getting ready for this terrible day, to ease the fear over knowing all the sins you committed will be exhibited to the Lord and the world, is for you to do this, this, this, and this. Even if you did not have some terror over the idea of the Lord's return, you can certainly empathize with Luther's fear of it as a young man. This is what he was raised on.

But six years before his death, the older Luther would speak of the "Beloved Last Day." It was not a day of terror, but a day of joy. And this is how we Christians are to think of it. This is, in fact, what we see in the Holy Gospel. Before any mention of works, before anything about what people do, we hear these words from the mouth of the Lord:

“Come, you who are blessed by My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” What is the basis of this judgment? Not what we have done, but in what God has done. Being blessed by the Father. It is inheriting, receiving as a gift, the kingdom that is prepared for us before creation even existed. Those who hear these words have already been separated as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. They are already marked out by God as His people. These are the ones who have already heard the judgment. The wrath, the judgment, the punishment for their sin is taken away as they clung to Christ who suffered that for them on the cross.

This is where you will be. You have already been marked out as one of Christ’s sheep. You have been named an heir of the kingdom, that is what you will inherit by virtue of your baptism into Christ. What He is, so are you. In Jesus, you are blessed by the Father. As you find Him here in this life, that sweet Savior and gracious Lord, so you will find Him there and then. He is the Judge who announces to the entire world, to all creation, the firm and final verdict that you are without sin, a spotless saint, belonging to Him. And no one can challenge that. There is no appeal, no double jeopardy.

*My Savior paid the debt I owe
And for my sin was smitten;
Within the Book of Life I know
My name has now been written.
I will not doubt, for I am free,
And Satan cannot threaten me;
There is no condemnation!*

There is no condemnation. There is no basis for a condemnation. The sins which you have done in thoughts and words and actions are not entered in as evidence because they are not yours. They are on Christ, paid for with His blood. That is the judgment you hear already in this life when you hear the absolution. You lay hold of that truth by faith. You cling to what God says of you in Christ Jesus. On the Last Day, it will no longer be a matter of faith but sight. Because all that the Lord will announce of you to the world, the evidence, the proof that you are blessed of the Father, what demonstrates that you are an heir of the kingdom, are the works of faith, what you did to Him, because they were done for Him, out of faith in Him. There is no mention, at all, of the sins that believers commit. There’s nothing they have to answer for. Because they do not exist. They have already been answered for. Jesus says, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life”** (Jn 5:24).

Believe the judgment you hear now. Your heart is laid open by God’s Word, you can see and recognize your sins, but you are also to see and recognize who died for them. Who sets you free from them. Because of Christ God declared you innocent, set free. That is the judgment. For you, Jesus is not the dreadful Judge. Jesus is the Savior, the source of lasting pleasure. He is the truest friend, your dearest treasure. He is love incarnate, the sun of life, your splendor. He is the most tender friend of friends, the joy of your desiring, the fount of life. That is what you see in His death for you. Out of His love He cleanses you of all your sin and shame, to redeem you and make you alive to God and loving towards your brothers.

He is the bread of life. This life and love is what He bestows upon you today. Here is the fountain of His love for you, the seal of the kind and gracious judgment you will hear: forgiveness, life, and salvation. Here is the source of that abundant spring of works of love towards those with whom you are also united at this altar. The Holy Communion delivers Christ’s forgiveness and the pledge and seal of life and salvation to us. But it also is a sign, a picture. It shows our unity of faith and doctrine. It also shows even as it strengthens our oneness with one another as members of one another. Here we share one another’s joys, weaknesses, sorrows, abundance, and poverty. We care for the least of one another, for we are all members of Christ’s body. He bids us all drink of the one cup. And Jesus tells us that in loving our brother, we love our Lord.

That mysterious truth will be revealed at the Lord’s appearing as we gather with all His saints in the blest place which He has purchased for us by His blood. So we can take comfort, rejoice in, and even long for that beloved Last Day. It need hold no terror or dread for you. We will finally see with our eyes what we already have by faith. We will enjoy to the full what we already take joy in in part. And the fruit of bearing one another’s burdens, yes even of bearing with one another, will be seen and rejoiced in as the one flock is with her Shepherd.

Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!