

# FOUR LAST THINGS



**Death, Judgment,  
Heaven, and Hell**

teaches us that mortality, divine judgment, and hell stretch out toward the renewal and abundance of life for which we were created and have been redeemed.

## **The final theme, coming on the threshold of Christmas, is hell.**

Once a favorite topic of preachers, hell is now hardly mentioned in sermons. Survey after survey has shown a precipitous drop in belief in hell. And it would be a brave pastor who adorned the walls of a church with lurid portrayals of hell like the wonderful medieval Doom paintings still found in many British churches.

A glance at those paintings shows why hell is important. Even in the sharply hierarchical world of the Middle Ages — when the gulf separating the high and mighty from the poor and lowly was enormous and unbridgeable — those paintings showed men with crowns and miters among those dragged toward the jaws of a fearsome Hellmouth. Hell is a great equalizer.

What of hell? The human imagination has taken full flight imagining hell's terrors. What they all speak to at their best is the revulsion we should all feel at the idea of death having the last word, of life being robbed of love, of existence apart from God. In ancient times, Christians imagined hell as lying at the very threshold of oblivion. Life robbed of abundance and even a shadow of eternity becomes nothing more than a parody of its old self.

**Death, judgment, heaven, and hell** teach us two paradoxical ideas: the importance of limitation in this life and the abundance or absence of that life in the next. Mortality and divine judgment tell us that this life is fenced in and has boundaries and that transgressing those boundaries bears consequences. Heaven and hell teach us why those boundaries exist: to turn the experience of our daily life toward a life eternally filled with God's love.

Our society has lost its capacity to live within proper limits. Our very idea of freedom scorns limitations. To be truly free, we say, is to be unbound from any external limitations: familial, social, religious, political, natural, and, increasingly, physical. Yet, even as pulpits fall silent about the Four Last Things, nature has begun to preach. Without limits, human life doesn't flourish but inexorably embraces death and judgment and all too often creates human hells. Climate change, the Anthropocene, pollution, degrading communities, and unsustainable growth have begun to remind even the most hardened secularists that this life stands always under judgment, whether we like it or not.



We are a Christian ministry based primarily in the Episcopal Church, a member of the Anglican Communion. Since 1878 we have published educational resources of various kinds and *The Living Church* magazine.

## From at least the high Middle Ages, churches have focused on the Four Last Things during the season of Advent. Death, judgment, heaven, and hell rouse people from the festivities of December to ponder matters both profound and, perhaps, profoundly depressing.

The Four Last Things are a popular designation for *eschatology*, the study of last things or the end. They focus our thoughts on our end and the wider context of the world's end when Christ returns in judgment. The Christian Year begins by fixing our attention on the end.

Possibly because of their sharp contrast to the cheer of the weeks building toward Christmas, the Four Last Things are now rarely topics for Advent sermons. Yet they continue to have a central place in Christian belief and practice. Arguably, they have an even more important place than ever. To see why, we must begin by looking at the intention of each topic.

### We begin with death.

In the past, death was an ever-present and imminent stalker. For most people, life was nasty, brutish, and short, and one's demise a constant concern reinforced by the frightful regularity with which children, friends, family, and neighbors perished. The popularity of preaching on the Four Last Things coincided with the arrival of the Black Death. People were understandably eager to know how to prepare for a good death. They knew their mortality all too well, and sought to accept the words of Psalm 103:15-16:

As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.

Personal mortality reminds people of what they share with all things. Everything but God is born, lives, and dies. The

1662 prayer book office includes this reminder: "Man, that is born of a woman, hath but a short time to live, and is full of misery. He cometh up, and is cut down, like a flower; he fleeth as it were a shadow, and never continueth in one stay. In the midst of life we are in death." Such considerations instill humility and acceptance of our limitations.

### Next is judgment.

Everyone will appear before Christ when he returns to judge the living and the dead. Christians must examine their lives with vigor, facing and confessing their "manifold sins and wickednesses," making amendments wherever necessary. Such examination is given urgency by the reminder that we can never know the hour of our death.

Few ideas have shown greater political effect than the Christian doctrine of judgment. That judges themselves stand under divine judgment reshaped how we understand mercy and judgment. St. Augustine wrote in a letter to a judge perturbed by the interference of clergy on behalf of criminals,

Judges ..., the very avengers of crime, who are not to be influenced by their personal anger but are to be agents of the law, and those who enforce the law against proven injuries done to others ..., all these quail before the divine judgment, recalling that they have need of the mercy of God for their own sins, and they do

not think they do injury to their office if they show mercy to those over whom they have the lawful power of life and death. (*Letter* 153:8)

One of the most fruitful characteristics of medieval theology was the struggle to demonstrate how justice and mercy, both found supremely in God, are not contradictory, even if we find it hard to see how.

### Third is Heaven.

Congregations must have breathed a sigh of relief when they reached the Third Sunday in Advent and the theme of heaven. Heaven remains the only popular part of Christian eschatology. Given heaven's encouraging nature, it's all too easy to see heaven as a foil to the

other themes: a major key amid minor

ones. But heaven is the theme that gives meaning to the others. Heaven tells us that true life transcends death and is eternally free from it, that divine judgment deals once and for all with everything that seeks to diminish such life, that hell awaits only those who steadfastly insist on diminishing that life.

In short, heaven reminds us that eschatology is about true life.

Neglect the life we know as heaven, love, and God, and the other themes become depressing, threatening, even meaningless. Heaven is the touchstone that turns all to gold, for it

