

Matthew 25

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Neil Mancor

[0 : 00] I hope you have been enjoying and have been greatly moved, as I have, by this wonderful cantata number 70. Bach wrote this cantata for the second Sunday in Advent, which is why the theme has been chosen.

Vachet, vaitet, zaidberit, watch, pray, be prepared. Because it is about expectation. Looking ahead not to the first coming of Christ at Christmas, but beyond.

To his final judgment. When he will come and wrap up human history and bring judgment upon the human race. It's an Advent work.

The theme is Christ's second coming and the last judgment. And how could you miss that with that glorious introduction? With the choir entering unaccompanied to give that tremendous forewarning. Of the last judgment. It's very powerful. Vachet, vaitet, vaitet, vachet, zaidberit, alletzeit, bis der Herr der Herrlichkeit dieser Welt ein Ende machet.

[1 : 11] Watch ye, pray ye, pray ye, watch ye. Keep prepared for the day when the Lord of Majesty to this world its endeth bringeth.

And this has been described as one of Vach's great choruses and who could disagree. The scope of the cantata is glorious. It treats of the awesome majesty of God.

And of a final day when Christ will come again and end human history. That will be a day of God's final judgment upon the human race.

The execution of God's final sentence upon all of humanity and upon each human person, body, and soul. Well, that's kind of a grim sounding event, don't you think?

And not really very in keeping with the ethos of Vancouver. And I think that probably that is because we reckon we already are in paradise.

[2 : 15] We're already there. I read this description of Vancouver in Western living. If you asked West Coast residents to describe paradise, you might just find them describing something pretty close to home.

There's a reason the West is affectionately dubbed Lotus Land by residents and non-residents alike. In the Odyssey, a few of Odysseus' men sample the lotus and forget about their homeland, pleading to stay forever in their new paradise.

The West Coast attracts newcomers every year who discover the wonders of West Coast living and feel as tempted as Odysseus' men never to leave this newfound paradise.

And who can blame them? With spectacular viewscapes, inviting beaches, and a temperate climate matched with a cosmopolitan city that offers the best of big city living.

And it goes on to discuss house prices. But, you know, I can certainly relate to those sentiments as a born and bred Vancouverite, yet who has lived abroad and returned.

[3 : 26] For nothing can quite compare to the West Coast for sheer lifestyle. We are blessed here. Everywhere you look, you can see the hand of God in nature. You can get close to it.

I love skiing. And I remember being up on a mountain in Switzerland, about to ski down a glacier one beautiful day, with the most glorious views of the Alps. And suddenly I remembered it was about 10 o'clock on a Sunday morning, and I thought, God is good.

And I think life is like that here, you know, in this West Coast paradise. You're up on a ski hill, you're in nature, and you think all is well with God. And so Vancouver really has its own gospel.

There is a salvation according to Vancouver. For we are a tolerant and accepting people. We allow people the freedom to live their lives as they see fit.

We do not judge others, nor do we lay upon them our sense of right and wrong. Because we're laid back and easygoing. Everyone is free to determine their own morality and live their lives in their own integrity.

[4 : 29] We do not wish to inhibit other people's right to freedom and self-expression. We want to free people to be themselves. And I love that tolerant, accepting, inclusive attitude.

It must come from living in paradise here. That's the gospel for Vancouver. And as someone who has lived in and experienced other countries, I can say that Vancouver is quite unique in that way. Other places can be quite conservative, even intolerant, about lifestyle or foreigners or personal expression. Other places have very different understandings of what is moral and acceptable. And I guess that just goes to show you that there is, on earth, no absolute and acceptable standard. No authority to which everybody has to live.

Because we're free. Free to determine our own lives and our own morals. To live our lifestyles according to what works for us. And makes us feel the most alive, authentic and human.

[5 : 28] That's salvation Vancouver style. And all that is wonderful. I think it's great. But Bach is putting a question to us in this cantata. And it takes us a little bit beyond our own current life here in Vancouver.

A little bit beyond my own lifestyle. My own integrity. And what he is asking is this. Are you prepared to meet God?

There is an old hymn that goes like this. It is well. It is well with my soul. Can you say that?

Can you say it today? For what Bach is presenting to us is a picture of paradise, but also of its opposite, hell. And neither of them looks quite like Vancouver.

And neither of them has to do with you, your lifestyle, or your own personal integrity. They have to do with God. With his authority and his love.

[6 : 30] Are you prepared to meet God? Is it well with your soul? In preparation for today, I asked a friend of mine who occasionally comes to church.

I said, Well, what do you think is going to happen when you die? Just wanted to know what she thought. And she was quite clear. She said, I'm going to go to heaven. So I said, Well, how do you know?

And she said, Because I am. So I said, Well, how can you be sure? And she said, Because I just know. So I said, Yeah, but how can you be sure?

And she said, Because that is what I believe. So I pushed a bit further and said, Yes, but on what basis do you think God will accept you into heaven?

And she said, Because I'm a good person. Well, I thought that was a very good Vancouver answer. Quite right, too. We are, most of us, good people with a good life.

[7 : 29] But, you see, That has nothing whatsoever to do with your eternity. How do you know that you're going to spend eternity in heaven in the presence of God?

How do you know that when God judges you, You will be found to be acceptable in His sight? Are you prepared? Is it well with your soul today?

For if God accepts you because you are a good person, Does that not make Him the most arbitrary of gods? By what standard, then, does He save people?

Does salvation happen when we live a good life? When we are successful as people? When we are true to ourselves? When we live lives of integrity? But then who is to say what the dividing line is? Are drug pushers and pimp the ones on the losing side? But good middle class people like us and the other? For when we assume that we will all go to heaven and be accepted by God Because we live in Vancouver and are essentially good people who do no harm, Well, what we are doing is justifying ourselves in our own eyes and in our own terms.

[8 : 48] We take the tolerant, inclusive, accepting ethos of Vancouver, of our society, And place it onto God And assume that He operates as we do With our values, our morals.

And so we justify ourselves and say, Here I am. I am a good person. I have not hurt anybody except me. Yet we do that without any mediator And without any reconciliation.

I justify myself before my wife all the time. You forgot to take the garbage out And now we missed the garbage collection. Yes, but I was tired and busy and I just forgot.

It wasn't my fault. You put something in the laundry that ran and colored the entire load pink. Oh, but I didn't notice it wasn't my fault. And anyways, I'm so busy and stressed, I've got to preach on Sunday.

It's not my fault. And you see, I justify myself to my wife all the time. Rather than getting myself justified and reconciled within her.

[10:00] See, by saying, I'm sorry. I did that. I'll try to make it better. Which is pretty difficult to do when you have colored the laundry pink. But you see, what does it help anyone to get justified in your own eyes?

It does not reconcile me to my wife. And it cannot reconcile you to God. And I have to tell you that the God who revealed himself in the Bible and in Jesus Christ does not operate in that way.

I am a good person. I am a good person. It's fine. But it does not ensure that you have reconciled yourself to God, your creator. How will you know?

For the question is not, is it well with my life? The question is, is it well with my soul today? And the difficult fact that the last judgment places before us is this.

There is a reality and a standard beyond our own that is absolute and unchanging. To which we must all be reconciled.

[11:08] By which we will all be judged. Against which we have all offended. And it is God's. Are you prepared for that?

Is it well with your soul? Yet the good news is that the last judgment is not the whole picture. For God does not desire that we should fall short.

And his way of working this out is expressed like this. Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Oh, the uncomfortable truth is that we all need to be reconciled to God. Made right with him. Justified in his sight. And on his terms.

Therefore, being justified by faith. Are you certain right now that you are justified in the sight of God? Are you right now reconciled to God?

[12:10] If so, on what basis? If not, what then is your status? How does God look at you? Is he neutral about you? But you see, God is never indifferent towards sin.

And so if you are not in a state of complete rightness with God, then you are in a state of unrightness before God. See, are you a good person?

But are you good enough? You say, well, I've never killed anybody. I've never cheated anyone. But in the Bible, Jesus commands us to love God with all our heart and soul, mind and strength.

And to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. So is there anybody you hate? Anybody you've cut out of your life or slandered? Anybody about whom you've gossiped?

And have you obeyed the command to love God with that total commitment and total intensity? Is God the center of your life? Is cultivating a relationship with God the number one priority in your life?

[13:15] Or have you ignored him? For if you have kept God at a distance, if you have kept God out of your life, then you have disobeyed him. And no matter how wonderful your lifestyle may be, you are living in disobedience to God, unforgiven and unreconciled.

You say, well, I've never committed adultery with anyone. I am a good person. But Jesus says that even if you look at someone lustfully, it is as if you have committed adultery with them.

For sin is not something that has to do with your actions. Sin is not a lifestyle choice. The only sinners are not the drug pushers out there.

No sin has to do with disobedience to God in action, in word, in thought, in the heart, as much as in the doing.

Is it well with your soul today? For if you are not reconciled with God, you have broken his law and disobeyed him.

[14:22] How is it then you will be reconciled with God? How will you be justified before him? Because I don't know about you, but I have a really hard time with sin.

I struggle with it. I willfully offend against God and disobey him. But the glorious truth is that God has made it possible for us to be reconciled with him, to be justified in his sight.

And this is God's plan. Namely, that even though we cannot be saved by our obedience, we should be saved by Christ's obedience.

For Jesus, the Son of God, has appeared in human being. He lived a life of perfect obedience to God. And as a result of that obedience, being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even the death of the cross.

And the condemnation that was rightfully mine, he took upon himself. The punishment that I should bear, he bore. The death I ought to die, he died.

[15 : 37] And so God's plan is this. It's as if he says, I cannot bless you for your own sakes, but I will bless you for his sake.

And now looking at you through him, I can bless you, though you do not deserve it. I can pass by your undeserving. I can blot out your sins through what he has done.

You do not deserve it, but he does. You are full of sin and must be punished. But he has been punished instead of you. And now I can deal with you.

This is the language of God put into human words. I can deal with you upon terms of mercy through the merits of my son. And this is the way the gospel comes to you.

This is the way salvation comes to your life. If you believe in Jesus, that is to say, if you trust in him, all the merits of Jesus are your merits, are counted to you.

[16 : 42] All the sufferings of Jesus are your sufferings. Every one of his merits is counted as yours. And so you can stand before God as if you were Christ, because Christ stood before God as if he were you.

Christ in your stead. You in Christ's stead. He is your substitution. Christ is the substitute for every human being.

Christ standing in our place. Human beings standing in Christ's place, receiving the joy of God's acceptance. And the result is that we have peace with God and better access to him.

We have access to intimacy with God our Father, because through Jesus we are clean. And this is not the privilege of the few. This is not about being exclusive.

This is an overpowering, inclusive love for everyone who is justified before God today. And if you stand before God reconciled and made right with him, then even in heaven, you will not be more acceptable to God than you are now.

[17 : 56] For that is the status into which faith brings a sinner. And so do you see that that language of punishment is true?

But it doesn't need to be true for you or for me. It does not need to be our reality. For Christ has stood in our place and offered for us a substitution.

And even though we are sinners who are under sentence, so Christ has redeemed us. Is it well with your soul today? At the end of this service, you will sing of your own salvation.

Not for heaven, nor the world is my weary spirit yearning. Jesus pled with God for me. All his wrath to kindness turning from his judgment set me free.

Jesus mine, I cling to thee. Is it well with your soul today? My friends, it can be. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.