

In the Bible, judgment belongs to God the Creator: he embodies his own righteousness in the way he creates the universe. Human beings are to respond to this revelation of justice by living justly themselves. If we choose well and live obedient to our making, we will experience the peace of the created cosmos. If we choose badly, and live an unjust life, we will experience friction within the cosmos, and (in the end) death.

Pharisees represent the search for goodness which will bring blamelessness, and thus peace before the idea of God the Judge, But Jesus differs from them. He thinks that deliverance from the fear of judgment comes through receiving forgiveness in God's grace - in other words, being loved by God. This comes to us as a free gift, and isn't dependent on our forgiveness of others. But to live a vengeful life whilst depending on God's forgiveness makes no possible sense, and the integrity of a forgiven sinner demands a responding forgiveness of others.

Today's Gospel is therefore very plain. We should refrain from that comparative goodness which measures our value by the relative sinfulness of others; and we should beware of taking up high moral ground - which will stand between us and our necessary repentance from our sins. If we become blinded to our own need for forgiveness, how can we be saved from the fear of judgment?

The world has a vacant space where this obedience to God should be. It spends a whole industry on contemplating the sins of others - in press reports, and in endless crime dramas, reconstructions, and documentaries. It takes carrion consolation in the making of demons out of public sinners. It's an addictive programme, but it will never lead us forward to search for holiness. And the Bible is right: without holiness, we are not just at risk in this world. We are dead.