

Each one of us, I'm sure, has seen illustrations of the Last Judgment, many of them terrifying as they portray Christ coming on the clouds of heaven in an awesome display of power. Michael-angelo's portrayal in the Sistine chapel of the Vatican in Rome is particularly gruesome, as it shows Christ as the scourge of the damned. Others have him seated on a royal throne, gazing out over an endless throng of trembling people.

The Gospel writers Matthew, Mark and Luke, used this imagery to describe the Second Coming of Christ in order to emphasise, to a first-century Jewish audience, the finality and all-inclusive nature of the event. They wanted to create a certain sense of drama, an atmosphere of awe and wonder, so that the down-to-earth people reading this message would not miss its crucial character.

In our traditional enthusiasm for picturing this scene we can readily lose sight of the fact that the judgment scene is only a metaphor. Do we actually expect that Jesus will meet us as a stern judge might, seated on a high throne, going through list after list of sins and good deeds, - that he will purposely take time to cause our anxiety to reach an even higher pitch, and then look up and nod approval (or disapproval) as we go wild with joy and triumph (or filled with gloom and desperation)?

It does injustice to the sense of the Scriptures to picture Jesus as a judge in this manner. Even after a person has rebelled against God for a lifetime, it is not accurate to think of a just and merciful God saying to that person after death: "Get away from me, you sinner!" or, even more vindictive: "I shall personally see to it that you are punished for your vices by committing you to torment."

No, that judgment scene is only a metaphor. What happens at death is essentially a continuation of what has taken place in life. If a person has chosen to live apart from God, has defied the love commands of Jesus, then at death that person remains where he or she has freely chosen to be, - estranged from God. We would be much more accurate in picturing Jesus as crying out to those unrepentant sinners after death: "I still love you!" But the sinners own freedom allows them to ignore that plea, just as they did on earth.

The gospel of Matthew shows us this, when at the end of the day of his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, Jesus weeps over the city, calling out in distress: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem. You kill the prophets and stone the messengers God has sent to you. How many times have I wanted to put my arms around all your people, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not let me!"

The picture of Christ sitting as an awesome judge in an immense courtroom in the sky is a metaphor used for earthy first-century Palestinians. But the reality behind the metaphor is a God who never ceases to love, even when people have used their freedom to reject the divine lover.

It is that painting we have to create for ourselves, always remembering God's infinite love!

*(Adapted from Sunday Morning Insights by Fr. Eugene F. Lauer, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA, 1984).*