

December 8, 2019 Divine Judgement Homily: One of the most notable figures in the history of American folklore is Paul Bunyan, a giant lumberjack, who was possessed of great strength and power. In popular stories he is often accompanied by a blue Ox named Babe. According to popular legend, Bunyan cleared many of the forests in the Northeast, thus enabling future settlers a clear path for their journey. Not surprisingly, Bunyan was the mythical hero of the lumber camps and an inspiration to so many loggers. Two of America's greatest poets, Carl Sandberg and Robert Frost, have immortalized Paul Bunyan in verse.

Paul Bunyan is usually depicted wielding a sharp ax.

The theme for the Second Sunday of Advent is judgment, the Divine Judgment. In traditional Catholic theology judgment is one of the four so-called "Last Things", along with death, heaven and hell. Years ago, it was not uncommon for a retreat master to devote at least one of his conferences to the theme of judgment.

In today's gospel, John the Baptist uses graphic images to describe the judgment facing those who do not repent of their sins and who are not faithful to the covenant of their fathers. In order to dramatize his message, he speaks of an ax. "Even now, the ax lies at the root of the trees. Therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire". (Mt. 3:10)

In Sacred Scripture, the ax is a symbol of destruction. In the writings of the prophets, the image of trees cut down often refers to God's judgment on the pagan nations. An ax in a tree signified the destruction of a sick or rotten tree, that is, one that did not bear fruit. Not a simple pruning is needed, but the felling of the entire tree!

Jesus comes among us to make manifest God's judgment. The Eternal Father has given all judgment to the Son. Following in the steps of the prophets and John the Baptist, Jesus announced the judgment of the Last Day in his preaching. Only then will the conduct of each one and the secrets of hearts be brought to light. Our conduct in this life decides our fate in the life hereafter. In the end, souls will stand naked before the Supreme Judge of all. St. Paul writes, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive recompense, according to what he did in the body, whether good or evil". (2 Cor. 5:10)

How do we prepare for the Lord's coming? After first acknowledging our sins (Mt. 5:6), we must heed the words of the Baptist who admonishes his listeners to "produce good works as evidence of your repentance". (Lk. 3:8) So now is the time for faith; now is the time for conversion, a change of behavior. We must take a hard look at our lives and ask ourselves: How do we stand before God right now? The time is very near for all of us for we are mortal. The hour of our death fast approaches!

But do we need to await death in order to be first judged by Our Lord? In March of 1865, Abraham Lincoln, our Nation's sixteenth President, gave his second inaugural address. Many historians consider his speech to be one of the finest ever spoken in the hallowed halls of Congress. Lincoln spoke eloquently of God's judgment on America. He truly believed that the Civil War was God's punishment for the scourge of slavery, the so-called "peculiar institution". America alone was to blame for the massive loss of life in the war years of 1861-1865. Although he was not affiliated with any one Christian church, he nevertheless had a profound love of sacred scripture as a source of wisdom and guidance. In his address he quoted from the nineteenth Psalm: "The judgments of God are true and gracious". (PS. 19:9)

Let us reform our lives! The kingdom of God is at hand! (Mt. 3:1)

Amen!