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An old firebrand preacher was berating the people during his sermon about the four last things and telling them that 'everyone from this parish will one day have to stand before the judgement seat of God. One man breathed a sign of relief at the back of the church and said 'thank goodness I'm not from this parish.

For many, mention of the four last things sends a shiver down their spine. One of these things is Judgement after death. It was mentioned in the readings last Sunday. It can conjure up images of us standing before a rather forbidding judge who goes on berating us for all sorts of misdemeanours we've committed in this life. We are 'shaking in our shoes' because judgement could go either way.

Well, I can't see it being like that. Firstly the cards are stacked firmly in our favour because God is a merciful judge. This is all the more pertinent this year when on 8th December we begin the Year of mercy. It can be a time of special grace for us.

St John Vianney used to say to his congregation that our faults are like a grain of sand compared to the great mountain of God's mercy. It is well known that Saint Augustine turned his back on God as a young man causing his mother, Monica, much heartache. Her prayers for her son were answered when he found God again at a later stage in his life. However, it is interesting to note that towards the end of his life he is quoted as saying that he would rather be judged by God than his own mother even though he couldn't have had a better mother.

When God forgives us our sins in the Sacrament of Penance, the slate is wiped clean - the things we've confessed will not be dragged up on the day of Judgement. When St Paul was speaking about the nature of true love he said: 'love is always ready to excuse'. Excusing a person however, never means condoning their sin. But if we, mere mortals, are expected to

make allowances for the mistakes of others how much more will God who loves us to infinity. He will have taken into account the times when our judgement was clouded and our ability to act as free human beings was somewhat curtailed.

We know that one of the sure ways to escape the judgement of God is not to sit in judgement on anyone ourselves. Jesus said: 'blessed are the merciful, they shall have mercy shown them.' And in the Old Testament it says: 'judgement will be without mercy for those who have shown no mercy'. So, spare a thought for people caught up in sinful situations even if it appears on the outside that they are at fault. Try and help them with prayers and good council even though they may not be doing a great deal to help themselves. Think of St Monica who never gave up on her son.

So, let no one be outside the pale of our compassion. Scripture tells us that the merciful need have no fear of judgement. On the Day of reckoning the Lord will take the side of the merciful and have their names written in the book of life.