



**Icon of the Last Judgment** 17<sup>th</sup> Century

*And He is coming again with glory to judge the living and the dead; His kingdom will have no end. I look for the resurrection of the dead. And the life of the age to come. Amen*

– The Symbol of Faith (Nicene Creed)

In the Divine economy for mankind there is a plan for future until then end of all ages. The word of God offers us many glimpses into this future age: the Second Advent of the Lord, the resurrection of the dead, the end of the world, the beginning of the Kingdom of Glory and Eternal Life. On the western walls of many churches there is often found an Icon of all these events: **The Icon of the Last Judgment**. *For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. (Matt 24:27)*



“All the tribes of the earth will mourn”

Just as Jesus describes His Second Coming, so it is depicted in the Icon: suddenly with great drama. To any casual observer the Icon seems confusing and terrible, yet to Christians – who are supposed to recognize the signs – everything within the Icon is recognizable as a promise made by God concerning the end of the world. Christ goes on to say that *the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn* (Matt 24:30). According to the interpretation of the Holy Fathers, the “sign” in Heaven is the Cross, so at the centre of the Icon stands the Cross of Christ above what looks like a table. It is in fact, an ancient Greek style of throne, called the Throne of Preparation. Often to the right of this, the “tribes of the earth” are shown in fear as Moses shows declares to them the Final Judgment.



The Book of Life, the Cross, and Christ in Glory (Tolga Monastery)

And they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory, the Lord goes on to describe, *with the holy angels* (Mark 8:38). *He shall sit on the throne of His glory* (Matt 25:31). All of this is shown in the top of the Icon: Christ enthroned in a mandorla; angels, archangels seraphim and cherubim surround Him; often two angels are shown opening up the Heavens like a scroll above Him. As in many Heavenly scenes, Christ is flanked by the Mother of God to His right, and John the Baptist to His left – both offering intercessions on mankind’s behalf. Seated on either side of Jesus are the Twelve Apostles, enthroned as promised by Christ: *Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel* (Matthew 19:28, and envisioned in Revelation 4:4).

*A fiery stream issued*

*And came forth from before Him.*

*A thousand thousands ministered to Him;*

*Ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him.*

*The court was seated,*

*And the books were opened.* (Daniel 7:10)

The Prophet Daniel prophesied what is shown in the Icon, and the “fiery stream” divides the Icon in two.

Christ has *come to judge the world in righteousness* (Acts 17:31) and to *reward every man according to His works* (Matt 16:27). Thus, Christ is sometimes shown wielding a sword in His left hand – a symbol of justice. Just as Scripture makes the distinction, so too does the Icon: Christ’s purpose here is distinct from His first appearance, when He humbled Himself as a man, *not to judge the world, but that the world through Him might be saved* (John 3:17). Below Christ, Adam and Eve are shown prostrating before His Judgment Seat. Just as Adam and Eve represent all humanity in the Resurrection Icon, so too do they represent all humanity as they fall down before Christ at the Final Judgment (St Paul, quoting Isaiah, writes: *“As surely as I live,” says the Lord, “every knee will bow before me”* (Romans 14:11). And so, onto the Final Judgment. (Below: the scales of justice held by the hand of God and the Righteous entering into the Kingdom of



Heaven.)

Below the Cross, is a table, an altar, and upon it is the Book of Life, depicted as the Gospels. Further down is the scales upon which each man’s deeds are weighed. There is testimony to the reality of the Universal Judgment throughout Scripture, though the most complete picture is given in Matthew’s Gospel (Matthew 25:31-46). From that account it is clear that the judgment is open, and so one or more men are shown naked beneath the scales. All that will matter on that day is whether each one of us “fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, took in strangers, clothed the naked, visited the sick, and those in prison”, or whether we did not. Christ’s judgment on this will be strict and true, despite the vain efforts of the demons to tip the scales against us, as shown in the Icon. The Archangel Michael is also often shown here, ensuring God’s justice is done.

Upon Christ’s judgment of our deeds, all men will be divided either to His right or left side – the side of good or evil. To those on the right, Christ says: *“Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”*; to those on the left, He says: *“Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels”*.



The devil’s angels cast into the fire prepared for them.

These judgments are sometimes written in scrolls upon the icon, each placed at the appropriate side of Christ's throne. The "river of fire" described by Daniel sweeps off to Christ's left side, forming a lake of fire, Gehenna, the "everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels," in the bottom corner of the picture. To Christ's right, the bottom-left corner as we look at the Icon, lies the Garden of Eden – still guarded by Cherubims (Genesis 3:24) – but now open for the righteous to enter. Inside the walled garden, the Theotokos is shown enthroned, along with various Old Testament saints, and the Good Thief holding his cross. Abraham is also usually shown seated, a righteous man (with a halo) resting in his breast. This is the image of "Abraham's bosom" given by Christ as the place where the righteous who died before Christ's *first* Advent resided. Above Abraham, winged saints rise up to the new Kingdom of Heaven, *prepared for [the righteous] before the foundation of the world*.

On the opposite side, the devil's angels are cast down by an archangel (sometimes Michael) into Gehenna, the everlasting fire prepared for them by God. In the centre of the lake is the devil himself. Perversely mirroring Abraham's bosom, he also holds the soul of a man to his chest; yet instead of clothed in pure white robes (as described in Revelation), the unrighteous soul is naked, just as he appeared before the judgment seat. The unrighteous soul clasped to Satan's breast is sometimes identified as Judas – either by naming him or by showing him holding a bag of silver.



The righteous in Abraham's bosom, Judas clasped in Satan's embrace.

With all this, the Icon of the Last Judgment is complete. Other details, which are occasionally present in icons of this type, concern the end of the world. Once again, such images are from Scripture, mainly the Apostle John's Book of Revelation, but are too numerous to go into detail here.

In church, we direct our praise of God toward the altar, situated at the east of the temple, the direction of the rising sun. As we do this, we must never forget that behind us on the western wall there is the image of the Last Judgment, acting as a spur toward repentance, away from the devil and toward Christ. As we leave church too, the image is there to remind us of the inescapable reality of the Final Judgment, and how we must be ready to face Our Lord.



*When You, O God, shall come to earth with glory, All things shall tremble. And the river of fire shall flow before Your judgment seat; The books shall be opened and the hidden things disclosed! Then deliver me from the unquenchable fire, And make me worthy to stand at Your right hand, righteous Judge!* -Kontakion for the Sunday of the Last Judgment  
<https://iconreader.wordpress.com>