

‘The end’ Sermon first preached by Dr Christine Hoffman at FUMC Palmetto, 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2010

One of the amusing stories I was told as a child concerned a Methodist minister who once served my parents’ church. It sounds a bit far-fetched to me but my parents, who didn’t make things up, assured me it was true. This Methodist minister was a rather short man. He, therefore, needed to stand on a box when preaching to be visible above the pulpit. On one occasion, he became rather too energetic during his sermon and tumbled backwards. It was very difficult for the congregation not to laugh, especially once they knew he wasn’t hurt. What made it all the funnier was that his sermon was on the gospel reading we’ve just heard with its central words: ‘Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; .... “Where I am going, you cannot come.”’

This humorous setting made these words all the more memorable to my mum and dad. Sometimes, of course, it is the seriousness of the setting that makes words memorable. Can you recall an intense, perhaps even a final conversation with someone? Perhaps there was one thing this person wanted you to remember. Maybe it was simply: ‘I love you’. So it was with those able to communicate with loved ones just before they perished on 9/11. You may have heard the heart-rending recordings of those knowing that they were about to die. So it was with Jesus. But with Jesus, he wasn’t simply comforting the disciples with the thought that he loved them, but he was drawing out the implications of this love. Why did Jesus love them? It was not because they in some way deserved it. After all, they hadn’t been exactly perfect in their discipleship. It was because Jesus was the embodiment of the love of God – for all his children. Jesus, therefore, wanted to remind his disciples of the command to love. The newness of the commandment is not that love has never before been commanded (see Lev. 19:18). The newness is in the source that feeds this love: the humility of the Almighty God as revealed in Jesus’ death and resurrection.’ What Jesus is saying to his disciples is: ‘This is the end’. It is the end not only in the sense that he is coming to the end of his earthly life with them, but it is the end in the sense of the purpose of this earthly life, both his and theirs.

What do you think when you hear someone say the words: ‘the end’? If you’ve been listening to a long speech or a long sermon, you perhaps breathe a sigh of relief. Maybe at the close of an intercessory prayer in which we’ve prayed for everybody and everything except Edith and her sore

toe, The end can't come soon enough. . For some people the word 'Amen' has come to signify 'the end', perhaps long-awaited. As you know, this Hebrew word 'Amen', or, however we care to pronounce it, Amen or Amen, is a word of affirmation. So be it or let it be is what we are agreeing to. We are assenting to whatever has been declared in the sermon or whatever prayers have been offered. That's what 'Amen' means but what does 'The end' mean?

Well, sometimes, as at the conclusion of a story in a children's book, it simply means: 'You've made it. You've got to the end of the story. There's no more to read.' So it is with a dot or a star at the end of an article in a magazine. You don't need to be turning the pages to find where the article is continued. You've finished it. If you're in a hurry to get to the end, you maybe have a sense of satisfaction.

I wonder if we're sometimes a bit like this in our Christian Walk. I'm surprised how often I hear the words: 'When I get to heaven ...' or even: 'Will I get to heaven?' The speakers are here referring to the next life; but how many references can you find in the whole of Jesus' teaching to the next life? There are very few. What he does very often speak of, however, is the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God. Jesus tells lots of parables about the kingdom of God, or as Matthew prefers to put it because of his reverence for the name 'God', the kingdom of heaven. By this he means the rule of God in our lives, which can begin in any one of us any time we like. We can sign up to God's reign in our life right now. There is a future sense to this kingdom of heaven also, when all the world obeys God's rule.

In John's gospel, the preferred term for this is 'eternal life'. It is life as lived in God. It has something about it which lasts. That is why it is eternal. I heard in a talk last weekend some words which appealed to me: 'Hope is being sustained in Christ when human hope ends.' Isn't this the sort of sustenance that we are offered in these memorably final words of Jesus? Human hope does come to an end. The time comes when a 'Get Well Soon' card is no longer appropriate. The times comes when we hear that our relative is among those who did perish in a tower in New York City, in a coalmine in West Virginia, in an explosion on an oil-rig in the Gulf of Mexico. Even without the finality of physical death, human hope can die in all sorts of situations and it does. But there is another sort of hope, that goes way beyond all that we can conceive and produce. As the speaker I heard

last weekend put it: 'Hope is being sustained in Christ when human hope ends.' Or, as the writer of the letter to the Ephesians put it:

'Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.'

Every human life does come to an end. Personally, we may be ready and glad or we may be not ready and sad. Or we may be a bit of both. Even Jesus' earthly life came to an end and the disciples were sad. But when Jesus talked to his disciples, as in our gospel reading this morning, he seems to be trying to get their attention off their speculation about this sort of end. 'Where I am going, you cannot come.' Don't worry about this, he seems to be saying. Rather concentrate on what you can do. You can be my disciples by loving one another. Jesus is trying to get his disciples to think not so much about 'the end', in the sense of the conclusion, as about 'the end', in the sense of the purpose of it all. When we ask the question: 'To what end?', we're not asking about the conclusion but about the purpose of something.

'The end' that Jesus wants all of us to think about has nothing to do with time. It has everything to do with destiny. The purpose of our life, as individuals and as a church, is to glory God. How will people recognize us a people dedicated to this end? By our loving one another as God in Jesus has loved us. God has an intention for us all. This lasts from the old creation in Genesis with its first Adam to the new creation in the Book of Revelation and the second Adam. There is no time or place left out. The Bible begins with a garden and ends in a city, illumined by the glory of the Lord, who is surrounded by the adoration of redeemed humanity. That's why the writer of the Book of Revelation chooses the first and the last letters of the Greek alphabet as titles for God. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end'. If we've been trying to learn or to recite the Greek alphabet, you may be relieved when you reach Omega. It has been a tedious business. But when St John the Divine refers to God as Omega, he is thinking rather of the God-given purpose of all life.

You may be familiar with a particular statement of Christian belief known as the shorter Westminster Catechism. Don't be alarmed: I'm sparing you the longer Westminster Catechism. In fact, I'm only going to quote you the opening of this question and answer version of Christianity. Question 1:

What is man's chief end? Answer: 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him for ever.'

This is the sort of end Jesus asks his disciples to concentrate on. Whether in the first century AD and in the twenty-first century AD, we are invited, no we are commanded, to live a life of love. Jesus could at all times say of his life: 'Love is my meaning. Love is my purpose.' I'm not sure how this church's Glory Group got its name, but I do know this. When its members contribute food or clothing to needy families with children at Palmetto Elementary School, they are not doing it so that people will pat them on the back. They are not hoping everyone will sing a rousing chorus of: 'For she's a jolly good fellow'. The glory of this group is not of or for themselves. The glory is God's. The work and generosity involved are testimony to their being Christ's disciples. With any act of charity, a true disciple of Christ is not wanting the recipient to say: 'What a great guy!' but 'What a great God!' The opposite is also true, of course. When any disciple of Christ is heard running someone down or seen being mean, God is not glorified. The world concludes: 'See how those Christians do not love one another' or simply: 'See how those Christians do not know Jesus' God of love.' How sad this God must be when we do the opposite of glorifying and enjoying him.

Both the writer of the gospel and the writer of the apocalypse offer us some vital theology and inspiration. Love between human beings belongs to God's presence. Jesus is present through the love of the disciples. To live in Jesus is to love and to love is to live in Jesus. It is the gracious action of Christ that makes our love possible. The vision in Revelation reveals the true end or goal of life, the destiny of creation that has been taken up into the life of Jesus Christ. John provides us with a stunning picture of the living God dwelling among us through the Spirit's power. John's vision isn't the sort of heaven we tend to conjure up. We give it physical features-'heavenly mountains or beaches, divinely paved roads.... In the Revelation to John, that image is revised. The new heaven is plainly and simply the place where God is. This is the first and most important detail: heaven is the place where God is and humans are fully united with God. John goes on to describe a holy city. Why a city? Because cities are places where people live together in dependence upon one another. ... It is the welcome place where people arrive home at the end of a long and confusing journey. It is where God lives.'<sup>1</sup> THE END, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dana Ferguson in *Feasting on the Word*, (2009) Year C, vol. 2, Westminster John Knox Press, p 462