

The End

a sermon preached on the

25th Sunday after Pentecost

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by **Fr David Moore**

parish priest

Lections: Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

Do Christians live in *this world*, or not? We Christians often give the impression of only being concerned with another time and place. This apparently-otherworldly interest is always on the Gospel menu in the few weeks of the church's year remaining after All Saints: "As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."¹ This future-oriented interest did not start with Jesus. Indeed as Luke has been particularly at pains to point out since his opening chapter,² Jesus is the fulfilment of what has been long-promised by God and perceived by the prophets: "For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth."³ Actually, this is the great Jewish breakthrough which was clearly beginning to erupt in the late second millennium BCE (before the common era) in that narrow strip of land where Europe, Asia and Africa meet, which we rightly call the 'Holy Land'. The mistake, of course, then and now, was to literalise and concretise the symbol, in the attempt to make the land itself in some way holy – it's not the land that is holy, but the religious insight, the symbol, which is holy. This is always the mistake, and the perversion of all religious insight - whether of eucharist or church or doctrine or Bible - confusing the symbol with the reality. Nevertheless, in spite of human frailty and fallibility in such matters, the religious breakthrough itself is not nullified simply because its adherents keep stuffing it up. It's that great breakthrough to which our attention is drawn on this last Sunday after Pentecost.

To appreciate the revolutionary nature of what was emerging through the very human and fallible tribes of Israel it is only necessary to consider what was the prevailing religious paradigm in the land of Canaan before it came to be known as the land flowing with milk and honey - in a word, cyclic. Everything was going around and around, in eternal cycles. The task for humans was to make sure that they fitted into the eternal cycle of nature, by appeasing its pantheon of deities. Thus, the Hebrew breakthrough, inspired by the un-nameable and singular deity יהוה YHWH ('Adonai'), inevitably ushered in a fantastic clash of civilisations – no longer an eternal cycle governed by a pantheon of deities associated with rain and fertility and earth and sky and so on. The new paradigm, which shattered the peace of the age, had a trajectory, a direction, a purpose, under the influence of the One God.

Thus was born both monotheism and what we would come to call the modern world. Under the influence of this new religious paradigm, humankind, through the Jews, began to break out of the primitive and pagan paradigm of the eternal cycles of nature. The world had a purpose. Creation was going somewhere – rather than round and round. Humankind had a direction, a reason, an end. The creator and motivator of this directedness was the Holy One, the God of Israel, who was dreaming of new heavens and a new earth. This revolutionary religious breakthrough has been the spark and the fuel for more than three thousand years of human development. Under the influence of this religious paradigm humans have laboured towards an ultimate direction, an ultimate purpose, progress-oriented and purposeful in a dazzlingly variety of expressions. Ironically, the Judeo-Christian breakthrough would inevitably not only make possible an evolutionary worldview, but also, in spite of at-times violent opposition from within, open the way for an evolutionary Christianity. But like all revolutions, like all paradigm shifts, there are bound to be over-reactions, dead-ends, inexcusable betrayals, losses and, worst of all, violent eruptions. Until Christianity has honestly faced up to this dark side of itself – witnessed in the oppression of women and minorities, through crusade, colonisation and economic exploitation - it cannot fulfil its potential and fully harness all the vast energies of humankind. It is not a lack of entertainment technology or PR success or fast-talking

¹ Luke 21:6
² Luke 1:1
³ Isaiah 65:17

entrepreneurial leaders, but christianity's dishonesty about its dark side which is the real impediment to mission.

In addition to these distortions by which the church has oppressed and violated peoples, the christian paradigm shift has also ironically fostered a dualism resulting in an ambivalent attitude towards the world and the present reality. However, if christian faith is not a matter of obeying the eternal cycle, neither is it a religious bargain with the creator in the desperate attempt to gain some other-worldly state. The distortion which was probably inevitable in the doctrines of 'Fall' and 'Original Sin' is the idea that the human task is to return to a state of imagined paradise. My guess is that a great deal of 'heaven' talk is unconsciously an infantile hankering after a return to an idyllic Eden. "What will be the sign that this is to take place?"⁴ Tragically, the church continues to be plagued by religious salesmen and women claiming signs for this and that, preying upon a widespread fear of the future, peddling religion as fire insurance, or religion as sentimental happy-ever-after reunion after physical death. Instead of the future as that energy and vision which is to motivate and inspire development in this life, here and now, the future reduced to a religious product for either social control or individual satisfaction.

But beware! "Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and 'The time is near!' Do not go after them."⁵ Yes, there will be calamity, wars, earthquakes, famines and plagues and dreadful portents – in other words, life as we know it, and as humankind has always known it! The end, however, does not follow any of these signs – including the latest dramatic 'sign', in the form of global warming. Yet there is an end, a **τελος** *telos*, a final fulfilment and goal and purpose inextricably part of the christian paradigm. Humankind and the whole created order is *for something*, for a reason – human life is not random, nor is it an eternal cycle in which we are all merely ciphers, like mice running inside one of these fiendish wheels. Human life contributes towards the end, is part of the fulfilment of creation – that is the tremendous mystery and gift. The 'end' is not so much that which follows, therefore, as though it were a simple matter of one thing following another. Rather, the end is that future, that new heaven and new earth, which is always urging us forward. The primary symbol for this future the Bible calls 'the Kingdom'. The common human vocation is to become conscious of this fact, and to live in the here and now motivated by the grandeur, graciousness and expansiveness of the Kingdom. Christian faith is not a case of spending life preparing fancy speeches to make at inane 'pearly gates'. Rather, it is more like being so attuned to the future which calls us as to live fully and meaningfully in the *present*, in *this* world.

Thus, this faith confounds and frustrates both insiders and outsiders alike - those looking for a religious product to guarantee an Eden-state future of bliss after bodily death; and equally those who are looking for a convenient excuse to live self-centredly in the consumption and possession-obsessed here and now. The end, the goal, is neither a purposeless eternal cycle of carbon, hydrogen and oxygen atoms, nor a saving of the planet for its own sake, nor is it a return to some imagined Eden – whether of the harp and clouds variety, or of the cosy family reunion variety.⁶ The quintessential christian symbol for this is the eucharist. In the eucharist we both participate in and are drawn forward by the purpose, the goal – by the mystery of the end which is the Kingdom of God.

david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz

⁴ Luke 21:7
⁵ Luke 21:8
⁶ Luke 20:27-38