

A sermon preached by Dr Andrew Gregory
2nd Sunday in Advent 2006

The Last Things

'As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.' So wrote Paul to the Corinthians. His words are almost certainly the earliest written reference to what has become the Eucharist that we celebrate today. They remind us that what we do in the present is not only a reminder of what God has done in the past but of what God will do in the future. More than that, they point to the conviction that what happens in the present is determined not only, perhaps not even primarily, by what has happened in the past. The conviction that what we do in the present is linked to, derives ultimate meaning from, and depends on what God will do in the future.

Most of us, I suspect, are old enough to remember the time when not all days were shopping days. When posters in shop windows and adverts on TV would remind us just how many (or just how few) shopping days there remained before Christmas. Rather in the way that we count down to the launch of a rocket or to some other significant event, we count backwards the number of shopping days until Christmas. Thus reminds us that the Christmas shopping rush is determined entirely by the event to which it looks forward and for which it prepares.

The same is true of the Eucharist, and of all that we do as Christians. There is a future orientation for what we do in the present, for the ultimate meaning of what happens in the world today depends on something that is yet to come. On a benevolent God whose purposes will prevail despite the harsh realities of the often ruthless world in which we live. When things will be seen as they really are. *As often as we eat this bread and drink the cup we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.* And in the worship of the present we anticipate, experience and taste the life of the world to come.

This insight that the meaning of the present is shaped by the future as well as by the past is one way into the cluster of beliefs that scholars refer to as eschatology. This word - not one that I've ever before used in a sermon - was coined in the nineteenth century. It is usually defined as the branch of theological science concerned with the four last things: death, judgement, heaven and hell. Viewed from the perspective of all people living, these are events or states that are yet to come. Things that will happen in the future, or places that we will go, after this life is over. This is the definition of the systematic theologian, someone whose strength and whose weakness might

be said to be the wish to classify and to systematize the workings of a holy God who makes himself known but is always beyond our grasp.

Yet the word eschatology, as used by biblical scholars, is both more wide-ranging and more difficult to define. Certainly it includes ideas about death, judgement, heaven and hell, and certainly it looks to the future. Thus a temporal element is present. But the last days to which the New Testament refers are days that have already begun, not just those that are yet to come. Perhaps nowhere is this more clearly seen than at the beginning of Acts. There, in his account of Pentecost, Luke claims that in the events he narrates the last days have already begun. Peter quotes the prophecy of Joel that in the last days God will pour out his Spirit on all flesh, and claims that this has been fulfilled in the presence of his hearers. God is doing now what his prophets had said that he would do. Now that Jesus has been raised from the dead and has poured out God's Spirit, the last days have already begun.

Also present alongside this temporal perspective is another element that we might refer to loosely and crudely as spatial. Heaven and hell, the realms inhabited by God, by the heavenly beings and by the departed are not so much somewhere in the future as in a sort of parallel existence to our own. They exist alongside the world that we know, and from time-to-time the life of that heavenly realm, that place where God's presence is fully known, breaks into the world that we know. New Testament eschatology reminds us not only that God will act in the future so that death and mourning and crying and pain will be no more, but that there is a realm where that is already so. That already there is a realm where God's will is done, where God's rule is acknowledged, where God is worshipped as he should be. That what happens in this world will one day be brought into conformity with what happens already where God's presence is fully known.

This is the belief that underlies the prayer that we address to our Father enthroned in heaven: *'Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'*. God is already in heaven, where already his will is done. One day earth will be like heaven, and the world that we know now will be transformed to become the way that heaven already is. That day is not yet here, but even now we may see glimpses of heaven as we seek to join our worship with those already gathered around the throne of God. That day is not yet here, but even now in our worship the distinction between heaven and earth may just momentarily be overcome. Jesus becomes present in our midst, yet remains at the right hand of God on high.

Jesus' teaching that we should pray for God's kingdom to come brings us to the heart of the tension between the now and the not-yet that characterizes

the eschatology of the New Testament. Though in English the word kingdom is primarily spatial, evoking the geographical realm over which a king reigns, the word used in the New Testament is different. It refers not so much to a realm that is ruled as to the act of ruling. Thus when New Testament authors speak of the kingdom of God, the central theme of Jesus' preaching, they refer to the action of God as king. To God's kingship or government or rule as well as to the realm where that kingship is acknowledged.

This kingdom, says Jesus, is present in what he says and does. Yet it is also still to come. It is present and active on earth wherever there are human agents obedient to God's will. But it is not yet fully acknowledged by all. The God who made us, and made all that we see, is already enthroned as king. But in the sense that his kingship is yet to be universally acknowledged, his kingdom is still to come.

In our gospel this morning, John spoke of himself as preparing the way of the Lord. Making straight his paths for a time of great reversal when all flesh shall see the salvation of God. We know that that time has not yet come, yet what God has already done in Christ assures us that one day it will. As Paul writes in today's epistle, we may be confident that the one who has begun a good work among us and among others will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. The God who raised Jesus from the dead has given his Spirit already. And that Spirit is the pledge, like the resurrection of Jesus, is the pledge and guarantee of what is yet to come.

When Jesus died, to those who were with him it seemed that all was lost. Perhaps they could look forward to the final day of judgment when God would raise the dead in the hope that Jesus might be vindicated then. But now, with his death on a cross, all that they hoped for was gone and all that he had said seemed pointless. But then, three days later, God raised him from the dead. The life of the world to come broke into the life of the world that Jesus' followers knew. The first-fruits of the resurrection for which they hoped in the future erupted into the present. God vindicated all that Jesus had said and done by raising him from the dead, and by pouring out his Spirit as a sign that the last days had already begun and that God's new creation was already underway.

Here in this Eucharist we remember with thanksgiving all that God has done in the past, and look with confidence to all that he will do in the future. We do not deny the brokenness of the world in which we live, but rejoice that God has taken on human flesh and has lived, suffered and died as do we. We do not deny the brokenness of the world in which we live, neither do we deny the importance of the here and now. But as we feed on Jesus' body broken for

us, and for many, we rejoice that the one who is with us here today is present also in heaven. That there he reigns, and that from there he will return to transform this world, and us his creatures, that we may share in the glory that is his.

Not only that, we rejoice that in this Eucharist we participate already at the banquet to which we are called as we strive to see God as he really is. That in this Eucharist we join our worship with that of heaven itself. That in this Eucharist we proclaim the death of our Lord until he comes and we rejoice in the new life that he brings. The life of the world to come that God offers to us in the here and now, in these last days in which we are called to follow him.

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