

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,

The Last Sunday of the Liturgical Year: Christ the King; 21 November 2004 (Proper 29):
Jeremiah 23:1-6; Colossians 1:11-20; Luke 23:35-43

The Image of the Invisible

What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.(1)

Especially when we come to this point in the Christian liturgical cycle, I always think about T. S. Eliot's paradoxical expression of the relationship between endings and beginnings. For the point we have reached today is the Last Sunday in the liturgical year. And because we have been here before, we recognize an ending. Yet, precisely because we have been here before, we also know that a beginning is on the cusp of emerging. Today, we end one cycle of gospel and worship experience. Next Sunday, we move to the liturgical commencement point and start over. The question before us, it seems to me, is this: Will this starting-over be a "rerun" experience or lead us to something new?

I admit without too much embarrassment that I am a sentimental person, and the keeping of time in terms of seasons and rhythms gets to me because doing so gathers my experience into a context, where I sense a distinct shape to my life. Moreover, marking time the way we do in the church (so consistently interjecting thresholds of remembrance and meaning into what, otherwise, might simply be the mechanical unwinding of time) - this always calls me to a tearful sense of mortality, that time is not endless, but quite precious.

This is precisely the nature of Psalm 90's gentle admonition, Psalm 90 tellingly offered As a part of the Burial Office. It says: "So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom." Yes, Christianity's use of time, being very different from the way the world uses time, has a distinct purpose. In fact, time is one of God's basic gifts to us, and as followers of Jesus we learn that endings can provide new beginnings and, as Eliot says elsewhere, we shall come to the place where we started and know it for the first time.(2) Such knowing, intimate in its depth of understanding, is wisdom, God's Wisdom.

So, we say that with God life is a journey, with beginnings and endings and then - much to our amazement - new beginnings. People like you and me are quite fond of couching our life in terms of the image of a journey. Yet, part of what we need to realize is that being a traveler in life may bring out in us, not the poet, but something bitter. To the bratty traveling child that can be in us, the journey can elicit an impatience and even irritability, where we blurt out: "Are we there yet?" or even "this is boring!"

I was talking about traveling with a parishioner a few days ago over lunch, and we were commiserating with one another about how draining and inhumane the entire experience is. Yes,

there are plenty of occasions where, if we could manage it, we'd quickly opt to travel the journey by simply getting there as directly and as fast as possible. But not so for the mature Christian experience. There is something about the Christian journey that requires that we not just shift into warp speed and blast off with the speed of light from where we are in order to get to where we want to be. And today, of all the days in the Christian year, we are given a primary example.

Today, the Last Sunday of the liturgical year, called "Christ the King Sunday," not only calls us to take note of where we are and how we have arrived at this end-place and time; it also presents us with a rather disjuncting confrontation with Jesus' crucifixion. And at this point one can be pardoned for wishing that we had gotten off at an earlier stop along the line.

Can we possibly be at a more dissonant place? How much more out of synch could we possibly be with the rest of our culture? When every store is "ho-ho-ho-ing" to beat the band, our gospel reading depicts Christ's torture on the cross. Yet, to the spiritual traveler who trusts, who does not fall prey to the temptation to blast off as quickly as possible, we are reminded of a cosmic truth: that at the end there is the cross; and that without it there can be no new beginning.

I am frequently amazed at myself to realize again and again that Christians are in the business of death and resurrection. And in this vein, I am increasingly drawn to this morning's epistle lesson from St. Paul, as a way to gain insight into what this day is about. In particular, Paul becomes quite the poet, as he writes to his Christian charges in the church at Colossae. The fact that the Apostle writes from prison perhaps propels him from his usual instructive prose into the poetic heights, but he writes to his mission church (as he often does) in an effort to immunize them against false teaching. The threatening distortion, as usual, centers squarely upon Jesus as the Christ.

Who is this Messiah? And what is the actual significance of his life?

With unfettered deliberateness, Paul reasserts the apostolic teaching he initially gave to this congregation, and in so doing he renders a most powerful and compelling description of Jesus' significance. He says (in verse 15 of our second reading) that [Jesus] is 'the image of the invisible God.'

What a magnificent expression! "He is the image of the invisible God."

On this occasion where we stand on the threshold of an ending and a beginning, allow me to make two points about Jesus as the "image of the invisible." For today we are given two images of the invisible God, one of which points out an ending; the other indicates a beginning. Yet in both is revealed in the most intimate and powerful of terms what our God is like.

"He is the image of the invisible God." We have journeyed through another year of spiritual and biblical experience, and I would ask you not so much how you enjoyed the trip but rather what have you learned from it?

Over the last year, if we have managed to discipline our traveling restlessness and done more than just want to "get there," Christ reflects a God whose will it is that nothing shall be lost. This is what the cross images: The cost of love, of God's love, for us. Or as St. John so familiarly puts it: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish but have everlasting life."(3)

He is the image of the invisible God ... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.(4)

At the end of our journey, there is the cross, a sign and symbol of our God's steadfast love. Jesus dies, unjustly mocked and tortured, derided and rejected - by us - so that we may know -in our hearts and minds - that God's love is stronger than all forms of death and that in Christ's dying the price for our disobedience and neglect is overcome - and all by God.

On the cross, "He is the image of the invisible God."

It is a powerful ending to the consequences of our idolatry and fearful self-centeredness. Yet, the cross is also a beginning, and one that is very timely as we anticipate the season of Christmas. As unlikely and even as unwelcome as the cross is as a Christmas ornament, it would, nonetheless, provide us with a meaningful "image of the invisible" God, pointing to the fact that love and life become incarnate in our midst.

It is so easy to be derailed by all that December has come to portray and demand. It is so easy even for Christian folk to approach Christmas with the idea that we must prepare ourselves for a baby in the manger rather than perceive the "image of the invisible God" in terms of Incarnation. Witnessing Jesus' crucifixion in our gospel for today, rather than being like a black card in an all-red deck, is actually the way to remember what that manger scene is truly about, what the manger scene begins. "Emmanuel: God - with -- us - Incarnation: the invisible God in fully human presence, so much so that God willingly suffers and dies just to reveal to us what real power and real love are about.

He is the image of the invisible God ... For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.(5)

What we call the beginning is often the end And to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from.(6)

Today, we have come to the end. There is no more to say that has not already been said. "Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again." Yet, the question before us is this: Will next Sunday be a re-run for you; or will it be a new and glorious beginning?

In his glorious might may [the Lord] give you ample strength to meet with fortitude and patience whatever comes; and to give joyful thanks to the Father who has made you fit to share the heritage of God's people in the realm of light. He rescued us from the domain of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of his dear Son, through whom our release is secured and our sins are forgiven. He is the image of the invisible God...(7)

Amen.

(1) T. S. Eliot, The Four Quartets: "Little Gidding:" V

(2) Ibid.

(3) John 3:16

(4) Colossians 1:15, 19-20

(5) Colossians 1:15, 19-20

(6) T. S. Eliot, The Four Quartets: "Little Gidding:" V

(7) Colossians 1:11-15