

 *St Paul's Anglican Parish of Ipswich*
SUNDAY SERMON

Sermon on the 26th Sunday after Pentecost

Delivered by Rev'd Steve McMahon on the 18th November 2018

A sign in a bookshop I saw recently said "Post-apocalyptic fiction has now been moved to our current affairs section". With the world in the state it is, with the largest military nations in the world apparently sabre-rattling with each other, it's very easy to believe that someone already has their finger firmly on the big red threatening button of nuclear Armageddon.

Today's Gospel reading itself is a doom-sayer's delight with Jesus' response to the disciples questions about the end of days. The strange, morbid fascination with all things cataclysmic, is one that we all too readily leap upon. As you walk down the high street of many cities you will find some religious group or other, brandishing colour leaflets and magazines, purportedly demonstrating that the end of days is finally here. It's a subject that is all too readily proclaimed without, it seems, anyone taking note of Jesus' warning to "beware that no-one leads you astray". The church isn't exactly innocent of this either. So certain are we that we are right that we never consider that we might be the ones that Jesus is warning about.

Jesus goes on and talks about what is in store for those who are determined to be his disciples. Hardship. Being Disowned by family. Punished. Hated. If your relationship with God is that of someone who is expecting the world to receive punishment for sins then you have very little to look forward to! Certainly, if you read much of the media these days, it can appear that the church is filled with people of such ideals. If, on the other hand, your relationship with God is one filled with the light of the promise of salvation that has already been won through Christ's actions on the Cross, then the Apocalypse ceases to be a fearful prospect.

And it also makes it possible for us to be purposeful about living in the good time that is given to us.

It is this time that interests the writer of the letter to the Hebrews as he (or she) explores the nature and role of Jesus' priestly ministry. We see priests offering the sacrifice of the Mass, Holy Communion, Eucharist - call it what you like - every week or so. This isn't a new thing. Back in first century (and, indeed, throughout most of the period of the Old Testament) priests offered sacrifices daily to atone for our sins because sin itself is repetitive. No sooner have we been forgiven them, then despite our best intentions, we find ourselves sinning again. That notwithstanding, the sacrifices themselves are not actually effective in any real way. We cannot "buy" our way into heaven by things we do. It was this practice of purchasing a quick route to heaven that so angered the Reformers.

But when Jesus offered himself as a sacrifice on the cross, he did so in a manner that was not confined by time but "for all time" It needs no repetition, indeed, it could not be repeated. This is not as strange as it sounds. Consider any great work of art, literature, music or even science. The work can inspire similar works to be made. There are other paintings similar to the Mona Lisa, but there is only one Mona Lisa; there are many good poems and plays but only one Hamlet or Macbeth. Many fine tunes

have been composed but there is only one Beethoven's Fifth symphony. Scientific discoveries happen daily but the General Theory of Relativity is a most profound piece of work.

Some things stand alone. Works of genius have an unrepeatable quality about them. The same is true of Christ's sacrifice. But furthermore, Christ's sacrifice doesn't need to be repeated for it perfectly shows the love of God for us. In the life of Jesus, a life of pure service and a death brought on by love we see fully displayed for us God's love for his creation. God had no need to die for us. It wasn't to benefit Him but was purely because, as we hear in John's Gospel, "God so loved the world that he sent His only-begotten Son".

Furthermore, Jesus' death was an act of perfect obedience and therefore could be the only perfect sacrifice. Throughout scripture we read that the only sacrifice that God actually desires is obedience - not doves, or fattened calves. The life and death of Jesus was just such a sacrifice, perfectly given. It cannot be improved upon. Priests may continue offering sacrifices but Jesus' sacrifice is perfect and for all time.

So you might ask why do we continue to offer the sacrifice of the Eucharist? Firstly, it is because we are instructed to do so: "Do this in memory of me". But secondly we do not sacrifice Jesus over and over again in the sacrament but, we join in that same sacrifice in the upper room. In a very real sense, we are present with the eleven at that holiest of meals. The isn't re-enactment but is true remembrance.

Jesus' sacrifice reset the clock according to the time of salvation. We now have the very real possibility of achieving something that was not possible before - coming to righteousness with God through our faith in Jesus and his sacrifice.

So how are we to act in the intervening period before we make use of this wonderful prize that has been won for us? The writer of Hebrews offers us the practical suggestion that we goad each other to love and good deeds. Sadly, our English language isn't suitable for conveying the nuance in that goading. It is a sudden outburst of love that is demanded, a sharp, unstoppable desire to love one another that is called for. It is a love which energises us, puts an end to hostility and impels us towards new levels of hospitality, patience and service for each other.

For it isn't the power of God but the love of God which will conquer in the end.