

Sermon for the Sunday after Ascension Day

Preached at Summertown URC by the Rev'd Dr Mark Butchers,
May 4th 2008, 10.30am

We have all seen them. We have all read about them. We can all, in this computer age, access information about them on the internet. We will all have laughed at them, and maybe even, when we were younger, been frightened by them.

Who are they? They are the sandwich-boarders, the placard-holders, the website-authors who proclaim that the end of the world is nigh, that God will return at such and such a time on such and such a date. They are the ones who gather on mountain tops with great expectations that are duly dashed, the people who continue to gaze into the heavens; and then like bewildered NASA scientists painfully have to work out that they have been using imperial rather than metric, and that's why their prediction crashed. So they start again, redo the calculations and launch another ill-fated prediction of the endtime into orbit. I wonder how many times you can do that and still believe that the end is nigh.

There is no doubt that the Ascension points us towards the end of all things. The story of the disciples witnessing the return of Jesus to the Father resonates with references to the consummation of this earthly order: "when will you restore the kingdom to Israel?" ask the disciples. "This Jesus will return in the same way as you saw him go into heaven", proclaim the angels. The very setting of the story on the Mount of Olives is where Zechariah prophesies that God will descend to exercise the final judgement and become king over all the earth. The end may not be nigh in the Ascension story, but it is prominent; and just as Christ's resurrection is the foretaste of our own, so, I believe, his Ascension is the foretaste of the general gathering up of this created order to the Father at the end of time.

Ascension points to the end, but that doesn't mean we have to spend time and energy trying to predict when that will be. I would go further. I think that possibly it is wrong, sinful and blasphemous to do so. Why? Because to try to calculate it runs the risk of seeking to master the times and seasons, which is a divine prerogative alone. As Acts says: "it is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority". The time of the end is inherently unpredictable for us, because the mind of God is beyond us. To think otherwise is to set ourselves up as our own authority and thereby reject God's.

Now I don't know how many times you have waved a placard proclaiming the end of the world recently, but I would hazard a guess at not many. Happily such obsession with the endtime and predictions of it is confined to a few on the fringe. But there is an opposite danger, which is not merely confined to a few, but probably is the dominant view in modern Western society and even grips many Christians as well. The power of this view is much more potent, and the effects of it can I think be felt in the way we order our society, the aims of our society and the way we live our individual lives. It is a view that was well-nigh unthinkable 400 years ago, but has gradually developed to dominate now.

The view I'm referring to is the idea that there will be no endtime, no consummation, no gathering of all there is to the Creator. The universe will go on and on, expanding and progressing or decaying and contracting; it will have no rounding off, no fulfilment, no transformation in resurrection and ascension.

But against that I want to say that ends are important and built into the creation by God: they give meaning, direction and purpose. Try imagining a physical life without death. We can sense that eventually it would probably become unspeakably boring. But would it not also lack meaning? The sense that we are limited in time gives shape to our lives and what we do with them. The sense that we will go on to another stage connected to yet different from the first, gives us a purpose rooted in something more than just ourselves.

I don't know if you've ever seen the film *Groundhog Day*, a brilliantly funny film from the 1990's. Central idea of the film is a character reliving the same day over and over again, trapped in an eternal present which never goes anywhere. At points it has wonderfully amusing consequences, and he has great fun at first. But soon, like Sisyphus rolling his stone uphill time and time again, he becomes bored with reliving the same events over and over with no end in sight. He begins to despair, he doesn't want to get up, he loses all momentum and purpose in life.

The film captures well the consequences for an individual of an existence without any end. And what applies to individual existence, applies equally I think to our universe. The Omega, the gathering up is what gives it meaning, purpose and direction. We don't live in a Sisyphean hell endlessly going round in circles, but in a creative open universe that is going somewhere, that will have an end, and that end, I believe, will be divinely initiated. The Ascension gives us a glimpse of that.

So I have painted two pictures: on the one hand we have the danger of obsession with the endtime and the prediction of its occurrence. On the other the danger of the denial of it altogether. The Scylla of prediction versus the Charybdis of rejection. Both represent the under-mining of divine authority and the exaltation of the human.

With both, human beings want to usurp God's role. The predictors presume to know what only God can know. The deniers, even if they allow God to be Alpha, refuse to let him be Omega, and instead replace divine endtime with human utopias of a perfect society. They build Towers of Babel, which, however noble in intent, are inherently human and incapable of perfection. Christians are not immune to this either: how often in the last 40 years has Christianity been no more than a Social Gospel, bread alone, an attempt to build God's kingdom for him in a merely earthly way. God gets squeezed out and passion for a better society takes over.

Over against this stands the story of the Ascension. Firstly because it proclaims that there will be an endtime. But secondly for what it says about God and our relationship with him. The story of the Ascension is a mystery. It largely defies logical or literal analysis. At the heart of it is a cloud, which in the Bible is a symbol of the divine presence. Clouds in themselves are mysterious: they hide, they do not disclose. And the symbolism of the story is for me humanity being taken up into the God who is mystery, who is above and beyond all creation and all human knowledge. We cannot capture a cloud, we cannot capture God. We cannot describe him in words, we cannot encompass him with our minds. Nor can we pin him down to times and places, or equate his kingdom with earthly utopias. Always he is above and beyond us. Like a cloud, always he eludes our grasp.

And if Christ is representative of humanity, and the Ascension is the foretaste of our destiny, then it is God who will encompass us, not vice versa. We are the ones who will be pinned down and fully known. And it is then that we will understand that the times we were closest to the divine mystery were when we left off hunting him down or building towers to reach him, and instead surrendered and allowed ourselves to be taken up, swallowed, consumed.

Amen.