

Hymns: 378 “Father of everlasting grace”
 “Make me a captive Lord”
 498 “God of all power, and truth, and grace”
 345 “And can it be that I should gain”

Readings: Revelation 21:1-6a
 Mark 8:34-91

“I AM MAKING ALL THINGS NEW”

It's 15 years since my brother died. It wasn't an easy death. A fun-loving, fast-talking, life-and-soul-of-the-party man, - someone who could be outrageous one moment and tender and loving the next, always generous in his thinking as well as in his actions, - my lovely, younger brother passed from this life into the next. He was 57 when:

The weary wheels of life stood still at last.

I miss him.

I remember our last proper conversation. It took place at the Brompton Road Hospital where Jim had agreed to take part in the clinical trial of the latest, supposed, cancer-beating drug regime. The side effects were dreadful and he told us that he'd withdrawn from the scheme. It was too painful.

“So it's all over,” he said, “I must now prepare for the end. Don't worry. I'm fine. I'm not afraid of death. But I want to be ready. So this may be my goodbye speech (it was). Thanks for everything. And, remember, I'll be waiting for you.”

My non-theological brother was giving me, a trained theologian, a lesson in theology. A dying man seemed still so full of life. There was no nostalgia, no vain clinging to a vision of a distant past, no self-pity – just a simple readiness to face the future. It was so brave, so honest, so disarmingly simple.

The Bible is a book (or a collection of books) that describes “a living stream of history.” Its main events, staging posts, landmarks, are familiar enough. It takes us through the highways and byways of human experience. A nation full of promise goes astray. Prophets fulminate. God leads his people out of slavery. Human beings, created in God's image, are filled with wickedness and bickering. The promise of God remains firm and, for Christians at least, it is fulfilled in the arrival of a baby at Bethlehem. The sound teaching and immense sympathy of Jesus, his unconditional love and supreme offer of a meaningful and abundant life, are all dashed again and again by human silliness and small-mindedness. But the Church grows for all that. It stretches across the Mediterranean world. But not without difficulty. Or controversy. All this is “in the bag” as the Bible draws to its end.

As we reach the final stages of this remarkable sequence of events, you might think it was a good time for taking stock, for looking back over the shoulder, for thanking God for all that was past, for remembering the good old days.

But NO. That isn't what happens. The Bible draws to its close with a look into the future – a new era where so many of the ills and failures of the past will be eradicated. Jesus may well be ALPHA – beginning – but he is also OMEGA – the end. And, having seen how things stand with us, he promises to reinvigorate us in our endeavours. It's not the kiss of peace he offers, or a good night kiss if it comes to that, - much more the kiss of life, new life, a renewing of our sense of purpose. "Behold", he says, "I am making all things new."

Again, as with my brother, the end turns out not to be the end. It's pregnant with a sense of the future. There's more to come.

Let's imagine our life as a river. We're standing somewhere in the middle of its stream. Let our imagination run riot.

- Do we picture ourselves facing downstream so that our "**now**" is flowing away from us with all the drift and debris of the past?
- Or do we imagine ourselves facing upstream so that our "**now**" is always coming to meet us?

Is the source behind us or ahead of us?

If it's behind us, we'll constantly be challenged by what is over, and we'll need to set that against what might have been. The prevailing mood will be one of judgement. Did we do the right thing? Could we have done better? What if we'd done something differently?

If, on the other hand, the source lies ahead of us, then the challenge will be to be distinguish between what is and what might be. We'll look at our lives as waiting to be lived. The prevailing ethos will be one of hope.

I've drawn this image from a magisterial study of the Holy Spirit called "The Go-Between God" by J V Taylor which was written in the early 1970s.

So the words "behold, I am making all things new" begin to resonate. Life is waiting to be lived. And with hope in our hearts. But is this hope a false hope – the "infantile illusion" of Sigmund Freud or even worse, "the God Delusion" of Richard Dawkins? We should remember at this point that Dawkins, in his scientific life, wrote about "the selfish gene" and suggested that our genetic make-up controls everything about us. That is, in his view, we stand mid-stream looking down-river, obliged to see our "**now**" disappearing with all the other debris of the past, swept away with the inevitability of fate.

It was C.S. Lewis who gave me the key to a possible different "take on" the human predicament. This is what he wrote in his 1952 book "Mere Christianity":

People often ask when the next step in evolution – the step to something beyond man – will happen. But on the Christian view it has happened already. In Christ, a new kind of man appeared: and a new kind of life which began in him is to be put in us.

“When anyone is united to Christ, he is a new creature; behold, the old order has gone and a new order has already begun.” (Corinthians 2:5)

In other words, according to Lewis, we’re standing mid-stream looking up-river facing a future that’s coming to meet us. I can’t think of C.S. Lewis without remembering his writings on the poetry of John Milton. And I can’t think of John Milton without sensing those opening lines of *Paradise Lost*:

*Of man’s first disobedience and the fruit
of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
brought death into the world, and all our woe,
with loss of Eden, till one greater man
restore us, and regain the blissful seat,
sing heavenly muse*

The greater man – Jesus – stands mid-stream looking up towards the future coming to meet him: as we stand mid-stream looking up, he is the future coming to meet us. As he comes we hear the familiar words “behold, I am making all things new”.

The English poet Shelley wrote a poem called “Prometheus Unbound” – released from his shackles after insulting the gods. If any of what I’ve said above is true, then we can confidently speak of “humanity unbound”. No longer are we to think of ourselves shackled to the inevitability of evolution or our genetic make-up. We can subscribe fully to the theory of evolution without necessarily feeling that it binds us fatally into a cycle of activity that centres on natural selection, the survival of the fittest, the law of the jungle. Looking upstream, we can see a future towards which we can contribute a shaping influence. Of course it will shape us too. But it’ll be so much more creative than simply looking down-stream where the detritus of deeds already done is being washed.

And if our lives are no longer determined by our genes, we can also think of ourselves as no long being restrained within the straightjacket of convention or fashion or peer-pressure.

And if any of this is true, then we can begin to consider what it means to be genuinely free.

“What does it profit a man if he should gain the whole world at the cost of his true self? What can he give to buy that self back again?”

This was one of the key verses in a new translation of the Bible that forced itself into my deepest conscience and won from me the submission of faith. Perched on the edge of a promising career – a journalist or a barrister, a politician or a professor, I knew that I must go where I was being led. I heard the words “deny yourself”, “take

up your cross”, and “follow me”. And I knew that they were not simply a set of negative commands. I came to understand these instructions as meaning:

Don't look down river where all the detritus and debris from past ideas have been carried. Look up-stream and see how what appears to be self-sacrifice, sharing of burdens, the path of love, challenges you (from left field, out of the box) with the new possibility that “less” might be “more”.

I am making all things new – I want to lift you out of the enclosures of your life, to destroy the barriers that you set up around yourself to protect yourself, to help you reconfigure the meaning of our existence, so that you are no longer cabined or cribbed or confined but master of your destiny rather than the plaything of fate.

In his little book “Mere Christianity”, C.S. Lewis talks about the toothache he used to suffer from as a child. He knew that when it hurt greatly he could simply turn to his mother who would find some soothing tincture or medicine to reduce the pain. But he didn't turn to her too readily. For he knew that, in addition to addressing the immediate problem of his aching tooth, she would cart him off to the dentist who'd take a serious look at his mouth and do all kinds of unpleasant things to give him a more complete check-up. It was this “big picture” that deterred him.

As Lewis went on to say, our Christian faith can be just like that. We can use it to address immediate need – loss or sadness or pain. It can be a palliative, a placebo, a partial treatment for an immediate need. But it can also demand of us that we enter a new way of living that will help us address our needs in a more complete way. We can either look down-stream or up-stream.

And as we prepare to take bread and wine this morning, we can look at these elements and consider them tokens, mere reminders of Jesus's death. Or we can look at them as symbols that give us a foretaste of the heavenly banquet prepared for all people.

Jesus's words, with which the Bible virtually completes its task, looks forward as did my brother in his dying days. As we must in the bewildering times in which we live. May it be so. Amen