

SERMON – 3/3/24

'The end is near'

1 Peter 4:1-11

"Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude... The end of all things is near. Therefore..." (1 Peter 4:1 & 7)

Later in the service we will read again the familiar words of the institution of the Lord's Supper when the apostle Paul reminds us that as often as we eat the bread and drink the cup we 'proclaim the Lord's death until He comes'. What we do in this central act of Christian worship is not only to look back and remember what Christ did for us at the Cross, not only to recognise in the moment that we are united with Christ and with all the people of God here with us at this Table, those joining us online, and the whole church throughout the world and throughout time, but also to look forward to the culmination of all things when Christ will come again.

This morning's reading also gives us a past, present and future perspective on life, encouraging us to live our lives for Christ in the here and now in the light both of what Jesus did for us in the past, suffering for us in His body on the Cross, and in what He will do for us in the future when He will come again to reign, when this world will be no more and God's Kingdom will be all in all.

In this morning's reading we find the apostle Peter continuing to exhort us to live distinctively Christian lives, motivated by these twin thoughts: 'Since Christ suffered in His body' (v.1) and 'The end of all things is near' (v.7). *Therefore*, he lists a series of outcomes that are as relevant to us in the 21st century as they were to those he wrote to in the 1st century. Be clear-minded, be self-controlled, love each other, offer hospitality, use the gifts you have been given, and faithfully administer the grace of God, speak the very words of God, serve with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.

Remember that Peter was writing to Christians who were suffering severely for their faith (as many of our brothers and sisters in Christ do today around the world). Although we may

sometimes be tempted to think that it was somehow easier for our forebears in less complicated times to walk the way of Christ, in many ways we have considerably more freedom than most Christians have enjoyed down the ages to live our lives wholeheartedly for Christ and yet far too often most of us go with the flow of the world rather than standing out from the crowd.

Peter wrote to the believers of his own time: 'People are surprised that you do not join [the pagans] in the same wild and reckless living and they heap abuse on you' (.4) But in *our* society, many of us are utterly indistinguishable from our unbelieving neighbours – it's little wonder that we are not insulted because of our lifestyle, because for the most part our lifestyle proclaims that we owe more to this world than we do to God's Kingdom and the ways of Christ. Do Peter's words not apply as much to us as to the world around us: "They will have to give account to Him who is ready to judge the living and the dead." (v.5) Perhaps we ought to take more seriously what our Creed declares about what will happen when Christ returns and *all* must stand before Him.

'The end of all things is near,' says Peter. Let that focus our mind today, let that put everything into perspective, let that clarify where your heart lies. 'The end of all things is near. *Therefore...*' and he goes on to give us three pairs of challenges that I would like to lay before you this morning as motivations in the living of your life for Christ in the week that lies ahead.

First all all, Peter urges us to let clarity of mind and self-control be the fruits of our recognition that time is short and we will soon be appearing as individuals before the Judge of all the earth. "The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear-minded and self-controlled so that you can pray." (v.7) There can really only be two responses to the prospect of impending disaster – on the one hand we can say, 'What the heck! Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die' and that is the attitude that many people in our culture (as in every age) have to life in general. If there is nothing more to life than this life, my life, then why would I not do my best to squeeze every last drop of self-satisfaction from it, regardless of who or what may stand in my way? But that cannot be the way for the Christian – if as Jesus says there is more to life than the body, then the prospect of the

demise of the physical must surely prompt us to lift our eyes above what is seen, which is temporary, to what is unseen, which is eternal. Time is short. Life is short – and it may be shorter than we could ever think – 'Clear your mind,' says Peter, 'control your body, so that you might pray' and in so doing live tomorrow's life today, live heaven's way now. 'Your Kingdom come, Lord, your will be done on earth as in heaven.' Is that really my prayer?

The second challenge that Peter lays before us is this: 'The end of all things is near. Therefore... above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.' (vv.8-9) Although our walk of faith must begin as an individual before God in prayer it certainly must not remain there. Who was it who described the solitary Christian as 'a grotesque anomaly'? I think it may have been John Stott. If we are called to follow Jesus we are called to do so in communion with others, hard though that sometimes is. Peter exhorts us to love each other deeply. We all know in our heads and in our hearts that love is central to the way of Christ but it has to be more than a concept, more than an article of faith, more than a matter of fine words – it has to be *lived* – which is perhaps why he immediately pairs it here with hospitality, a practical expression of love in action. 'Love covers a multitude of sins,' he writes, and that quickly becomes the experience of people who are serious about Christian community. I love the prayer of the person who begins the day recognising that living for God is hard and praying for the faith and strength to be true to Christ. 'It's hard, Lord, and I know it's going to get a lot harder as soon as I get out of bed and begin to meet other people.' Living out our faith as part of a Christian fellowship inevitably involves being ready to forgive and to be forgiven. How many of us duck out of the hard conversations with those we sometimes find difficult to get along with in the church, and how different would it be if we lived in recognition that time is short and that we might not have time to put off the work of reconciliation. It's not good enough just to get along with one another or to put up with one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. If we are to live as we have prayed then we are called to love one another and to go out of our way to offer hospitality to one another without grumbling

and to discover the joy of love smothering even a multitude of sins.

But there is one final challenge presented to us here and it has to do with the way we relate to the world around us as Christian believers. 'The end of all things is near' says Peter. 'Therefore... Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.' (v.10) As God has called us to be members of one Body in Christ, so also has the Lord given gifts to each member of the Body, gifts that allow the ministry of Christ to flourish powerfully in the present day. When one member speaks it should be as one speaking the very words of God; when another member serves it should be in the strength that God supplies; when the Church is in action in the way God desires, the very body of Christ is at work in the world for all to see. God's grace is unleashed in myriad ways to bring light into the darkness and the touch of life to those who are otherwise as good as dead. Whether we each recognise it or not each one of us has an essential part to play in making the fulness of Christ known in this community at this particular time. Many of you will have seen the poster that will have been displayed in many a church over the years – in big print at the top of the poster are the letters CH—CH and the question, 'What is missing?' Down below are the letters U and R. What is missing from ch—ch? You are! Without your utterly unique contribution the work of God is impoverished, incomplete.

As God's people in this place at this particular point in history we are entrusted with the great commission to 'Go to all people everywhere and make disciples'. My dear friends, time is short. The end of all things is near. There can be no delay, there is not a moment to be wasted, our every word and action as individuals and together as Christ's church is vital.

As we live out our faith we are called to live in the moment but to remain conscious of the timeline between the coming of Christ and His coming again, between His suffering and death and resurrection for us and the day when we will stand before Him as our Judge. It is both of these things that we celebrate here at the Table this morning to make them real in the here and now. Christ died and rose again for you, and Christ will come again for you. If you knew for a fact that today was going to be your last

and that your appointment before the throne of grace would come before tomorrow dawns, would it not dramatically affect the things you said and the way you went about things, the attitude you demonstrated and the things you considered important? How would your response differ, I wonder, from that of your unbelieving neighbour?

As we come to the Table this morning, lift your eyes to the One who was lifted up for you and gave His life for you at Calvary, who won the victory for you and who will come again to take you home; put your trust in Him afresh today and go from here to live however many moments may remain to you: be clear-minded and self-controlled that your life may be honouring to God; love your sisters and brothers in Christ deeply and be so hospitable and uncomplaining in fellowship with them that others may see something of Jesus among us; serve others and be channels of God's grace in such a way that the Holy Spirit may be at work through us and that others too may discover Christ and that, as Peter writes here, all praise and honour and glory may be His for ever and ever.

“Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude... The end of all things is near. Therefore...” Therefore, what? Over to you.