

Beginnings and Endings
Sermon for Cashmere Presbyterian Church
Sunday 29th May 2022
Preacher: Rt Rev Hamish Galloway

Text: Revelations 22: 12-14, 16-17, 20-21

Introduction

This is the last book of the bible and, fittingly, it deals with what has come to be known in Christian parlance as the 'last days'. It is the end of the Biblical narrative and it deals with the 'end times'!

This idea of 'last days' and 'end times' has fascinated humans forever! Most recently, it has surfaced in a 2021 movie called 'Don't Look Up'. It is about a meteorite hurtling towards earth that is on target to wipe out human existence on earth and there is a denial movement urging people to ignore the risks, to simply 'don't look up'. It is, in fact, a metaphor for the impending climate change disaster that threatens human life on planet earth and the prevalence of deniers, avoiders, or simple human apathy that puts us all at risk!

Christians have certainly got into the business of 'end times' predictions! When I was a young Christian in the 1970s there was a huge movement around this theme spurred on by the hugely popular book by Hal Lindsay called "The Late Great Planet Earth". And at the same time a man called Barry Smith travelled the length and breadth of New Zealand filling churches and town halls with his message that the end time was imminent because current events were fulfilling Biblical prophecy. Some of these folk even put dates on it! Among the most prolific recent predictors of time and dates is Harold Camping, who has predicted a particular date 12 different times! He had a high profile predication for May 21, 2011, and when it didn't happen he declared his maths was wrong and it was actually October 21, 2011.....

So much speculation, so much spurious speculation! What does the Bible actually say?

First, 'last days', 'end times', 'end of the world' are strong biblical themes that we also routinely associated with the return of Jesus, as is the case in our text for today.

Second, "ending' is not final but more about a transition into something even more beautiful, as outlined in the previous chapter of Revelation where it talks about a beautiful new heaven and earth.

Third, the question of when this will happen fascinates many and this fascination heightens in difficult times of human history. The evidence is clear that the early Christians thought Jesus was coming again in their lifetime. This was based on a misunderstanding of some things Jesus said and was exaggerated by the terrible persecutions they experienced firstly at the hands of Jewish religious leaders and then the Romans. We have seen this pattern repeat and, even right now, because of the pressure of the worldwide pandemic, there has been a heightened belief Jesus is coming again any minute in some circles! It is about a desire for rescue in tough times!

The reality is this

1. Jesus was quite clear that we, and even he, do not know the time or date. It is both useless and wrong to predict.
2. Nevertheless, it will come, and we need to be ready! In that respect, my view is that it will actually come for all of us in our own lifetime, in that all die and will need to meet their maker so, yes, it will be soon!

Is this something to fear?

The previous chapters of Revelation contain some pretty frightening images of strange and scary beasts and lakes of sulphuric fire! And I personally was scared into my first conscious decision to be a Christian by Baptist neighbours when as an 8-year-old, they showed me a picture of sinners falling into the flames of hell!

On the contrary, there is much to ally such fears in this passage from Revelations 22. Instead it draws us to trust a loving God rather than fear a vindictive God! Let's unpack it through this lens:

Imagine a faith-fall – standing on a table and falling backwards into the arms of a group of catchers!

There are some strong affirmations in this passage that we can trust God to catch us!

1. God has reached out to us in Jesus Christ. There is huge imagery to support this idea here, the idea that God has lovingly reached out to us with a hand extended in relational longing:
 - a. Alpha & Omega – the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet – are referred to 3 times in Revelation. Firstly, in 1:8, they refer to God and make the point that God is eternal, the one who was there in the beginning and will be there in the end; infinite, external and immortal. Here in 22:13 this same thing is applied to Jesus, supporting the belief that Jesus is God therefore is eternal and infinite.
 - b. Secondly, this passage grounds this eternal, infinite, immortal Jesus in human history: 'the root and the offspring of David'. That is, God has come into our human realm through Jesus.
 - c. Thirdly, this is our hope! Jesus is the bright morning star! Shining out hope and light even in the most desperate situations, we can see all is not lost, there is a bright, sparkling hope in Jesus!
2. 'Alpha & Omega' speaks of God being there for us. He was spectacularly there at the beginning of this amazing universe, lovingly creating, and therefore we can trust he will be there at the end and it will be as spectacularly beautiful. I don't know how the end will actually look, but I believe God has got it! Just as he had the beginning. His loving arms will be wrapped around the ending and we will be caught by God!
3. The Gates are open and the entry is free!

This is a strong biblical theme of 'grace' (the free gift of God's acceptance), which is clearly seen in this passage:

(v17) the spirit and the bride (the church) say "come!" (or fall!). and let the one who hears say "come". Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes the free gift of the water of life.

The gates of the stadium of eternal life are open and entry is free! Come in! *or fall in* to the loving arms of God and you will be caught!

In verse 14 this is backed up with an image of baptism when it talks in terms of washing:
Blessed are those who wash their robes that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.

The lectionary misses out verse 15, which talks about the 'dogs' outside the walls of the city! We don't like to think about this! But it seems to me they are there by their own decision, for entry into the life in God's kingdom is open, free, and the invitation to come in is universal.

Finally, there is an interesting idea here also, that, once in, there will be rewards according to what we have done! (v12) Is it like Kiwi Saver, where all can join but at the end of a lifetime of work the size of the reward will depend on what we have put in? What does that look like in God's economy? I don't like to think in terms of different sized mansions! Maybe it will be relational and spiritual – that is, a deeper and deeper sense of joy based on the idea of 'well done, good and faithful servant'?

Worth pondering, but, ultimately, I know this as I fall into whatever my end may be – I totally believe God will catch me!