

## Sermon 13<sup>th</sup> September 2009 (2<sup>nd</sup> Peter 3:1-13 – Malachi 4:1-5) “All’s well that Ends well”

It was our 15<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary this week.

I have to confess we didn’t do it very well. I had a Presbytery meeting, and Elaine was running kids about – but we did get out for lunch.

When you think back to your wedding and remember all the months of planning, all the time and the energy spent just to make sure that the marriage begins in the right way, you have to ask yourself : “Do we put half the amount of thought or energy into making sure it continues the right way?” And as we said “until death us do part” did we even spare a thought for the question of: will we end well?

Starts are important, but it is also important to stay the course and to end well.

A child is born, and that’s a great day.

Then parenting begins – and that’s every day for years.

But one day that too will end and the child will leave home.

Will that end well?

Will the relationship with the parent be good?

Will we look back and say “yes, I gave them the best Christian grounding I could”?

Starts are important, but will we continue well, and will we end well?

And that’s true of our Christian life as well.

There was a day we came to believe – and that was a good day.

“Oh happy day, that fixed my choice” as the hymn says.

Christian testimony is so often people talking about the importance of that starting day. But, how will it end?

When we die, will we have persevered in faith and ended well?

Will the Lord say to us “well done, good and faithful servant”?

Paul says in Philippians (3:13-14) “*Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus..*”

Do we live in a way that will enable us to persevere and to end well?

The problem is that we live in a culture that is obsessed with the short-term, and thinks very little about the future and about the end.

Everyone seems obsessed with the next thing, the next day, the next experience, the next adrenalin hit.

When you look at a drug-addict what is particularly pitiful is the way the addict is obsessed with the immediacy of the next hit.

You can see their life, you can see the potential for it to end badly, or to turn around and be something else, something with hope.

But the addict can’t get past the immediacy of the present, and the next thrill.

But we have a whole society of people addicted to the immediacy of the present and the next thrill, with little thought for the long term.

We know we should save for the long term – but we want to spend **now**.

We know we should invest in our pensions for the long term – but we want to consume **now**.

We know we need to reduce our carbon emissions in the long term – but we want to drive **now**.

I know I'd be happier if I lost bit of weight – but I want the chocolate cake **now**.

We so seldom live with the long term in view.

The other day, I listened to Alan Greenspan, who ran the US central bank, and he was talking about the Credit Crunch and why it happened.

And he said it happened because people ignored the long term fact that a market is over-valued and at some point it will collapse. Because yesterday it went up, they want to make money again today – and they think nothing of the future. This, he said, is human nature.

We've had the Wall Street Crash, the South sea Bubble, the Credit Crunch, and, said Greenspan, it will happen again, because people are incapable of avoiding short-term greed.

And as we eat, and as we consume, and as we drive, we give so little thought to where it will all end.

The Bible always speaks of a beginning and of an end, and tells us that we need to live daily in the light of both of these.

Genesis begins, and Revelation ends.

Creation is at the start, and New Creation is at the end.

And as Christians, if we want an antidote to our short-term addictions, an antidote that allows us to persevere for the long-haul, then what we need is a Biblical view of the world.

Peter writes: (3:1-2)

*This is now, beloved, the second letter I am writing to you; in them I am trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you that you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Saviour spoken through your apostles*

Peter tells us that he's writing this letter to "arouse a sincere intention".

He wants to motivate us.

He wants us to be sincere – or real – about our determined intention to follow through to the end.

And he is going to motivate us by giving us a Biblical worldview, bringing us back to the words of the prophets (that's the Old Testament) and to the commandments of Jesus spoken through the apostles (that's the New Testament).

You see, there is a choice that we have to make as we come to the Bible.

Do we want to have the Bible's view of the world  
or do we want to have the world's view of the Bible?

If we want the Bible's view of the world, then that knowledge (and that's an important world in 2Peter) will shape the way we think, so that our priorities and motivations are different from the world about us.

The Bible will give us a new understanding, a new perspective, about the long-term purpose and destination of all of life – and that understanding will motivate how we live now.

In Adult Sunday School we are spending the first weeks trying to get a big-picture Biblical worldview.

But this is why it is essential that if we really want to persevere in our Christian faith that we get into our Bibles – because the Bible will reshape the way we think about everything.

C.H. Spurgeon said “the Bible that is falling apart usually belongs to the person whose life is not.”

So, what does the Bible have to say about the destination, the End, of human life?

And here, as we’ve said before, many Christians have this image that their destination is to die, go to heaven, and then, well, sit on a fluffy cloud with a harp.

And actually, I suspect we don’t really want to focus on the end because harps, clouds and haloes are not very attractive.

This doesn’t seem believable, and in any case it doesn’t seem much fun.

If I’ve got to sit on a cloud with a harp, can I have a playstation? Because I’m going to get bored.

The hymn Amazing Grace says

“When we’ve been there 10,000 years bright shining as the sun, we’ve no less days to sing God’s praise than when we’ve just begun”

So after 10,000 years of banal harp music, someone says “now, we’ve only just started.” My reaction would be “please, no more.”

Fortunately, harps clouds and haloes are not the End that the Bible actually speaks about: rather we are given a picture of an exciting day where God will unveil a new world.

This will be a place with no pain, no sin, no death, where all the best things and all best experiences of this world are amplified and permanent.

Imagine – a world where Scotsmen can know the euphoria of winning a world cup.

Imagine a world created by the same creator who made this one in all its variety, colour and surprise – but now even better.

And the God who made rainbows, chocolate and the Grand Canyon will never create anything boring.

The Bible compares it to a perfect city, a garden, an orchard – with no clouds in sight, and so nowhere to sit with a harp.

We live today, in the light of that day.

The day will come when Jesus will return, and when I will rise to be in a world without tyranny or oppression or death – a world full of God.

But Peter warns us, that many people will not like this idea of Jesus returning.

*First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts and saying, ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!’*

Very soon after Jesus’ death, there were people who were denying that he’d return.

The idea seemed unbelievable, and they disliked the idea anyway.

They wanted to live for the moment.

They wanted to indulge their own lusts and desires in the short term.

They didn't like the idea of Jesus coming back, and particularly the idea of him coming back to judge.

And so they scoffed.

"If Jesus was coming back – he'd have come back by now!"

"If Jesus was going to judge – he'd have done it by now!"

"If Jesus was going to change things – he'd have done it by now!"

"No", they said, "there is no end – there is just a now."

"We can carry on, as always, because the world will keep turning."

"Tomorrow will be the same as today and forever more the same."

"There is no judgement and there are no consequences."

They denied the idea that God would ever intervene and change anything.

Like the same scoffers who say to the Psalmist "where is your God?" – "he's not here, he won't intervene, he never really existed"

This philosophy we might call materialism.

It believes that what you can see is all that there is.

There is no point in looking for a creator.

There is no point in looking for a goal of creation.

We are all just meat and atoms.

This is all there is, so just enjoy it while you can.

Well, says Peter, they are wrong.

*<sup>5</sup>They deliberately ignore this fact, that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water, <sup>6</sup>through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished. <sup>7</sup>But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgement and destruction of the godless.*

Let's look at the facts, because they've ignored them.

Fact number one: the world has got a beginning.

Things don't just always go on the same.

Once upon a time there was no universe, and then there was a universe.

Scientists call this the "Big Bang", Christians call it the "Big God" but it is the same – it is a beginning.

Some people want to say this just happened of itself, but that ignores the fact that if you take a load of nothing and leave it for a long, long, time, it tends to produce, well, nothing.

Christians say rather that, in the beginning was God and God spoke his word, and bang.

So, we have a beginning – and things that have a beginning tend to have an ending.

If there is a first day, there is a last day.

If you have a birthday, then someday you will have a deathday.

And Science even now says that the world will someday end:

the Sun will consume it, and then the sun will grow cold,

and Scientists also say, this universe will some day end.

They call it the second law of thermodynamics; we call it the second coming of Jesus – but, either way, it is an end.

Those that live as if life will just go on the same, ignore this.  
There is a beginning and there is an end.  
And Christians see both as being in the Word and in Control of God.

And even between the two, life is not as stable as it appears.

The stock market may seem to keep going up – but equally it can come crashing down.

And even the natural stability which allows society to flourish is precarious, and should not be taken for granted.

Peter alludes to the catastrophe of Noah's flood.

What happened in that story?

People went on living in their own selfish godless way, day after day, with no regard to the consequences.

Noah warned them, Noah built an Ark, but Noah was ignored, until it was too late, it started raining, and their complacency was revealed.

And even without the story of Noah, we know that human life is precarious and complacency is short-sighted and foolish.

There is Earthquake and Tsunami, and a dozen other natural ways that human society implode, and that's even without adding nuclear holocaust or man-made disasters, or polar ice melting.

What's the message?

Do not run your life, or your family, or your nation, or your economy on the assumption that things will always keep on going as before.

It could end at any time – indeed you could die at any time.  
And indeed, at some point it will end, and I will die.

And that raises the question, "How will it end for us?"

Not when, or in what circumstances, as that we can't know – but how.

Will it end well?

Will the last day be a good day for us?

Someday we will stand before God's judgement – what will that end be like?

Now, I know, judgement is not a very popular idea.

I probably not really supposed to preach on that.

Church membership is down enough without me scaring people off.

The finances of the Church of Scotland are desperate enough without me alienating people.

But here's the thing, it is in the Bible.

It is right there from beginning to end: from Genesis to Revelation.

So either preach about a God who judges or, if you like (and if you pay me enough), I can ignore the Old Testament prophets, I can ignore Jesus, I can ignore the apostles, and I can make something up that you'll like better.

I saved the powerpoint I'm using today.

The computer gave it the default filename of the first word in the document, which happened to be "Jesus".

Later I changed the document and went to close it down, but I got one of those windows warnings which said "Do you want to save the changes you just made to Jesus."

Shall we make changes to Jesus?

I think we should stick with Jesus and the prophets and apostles.

But it is tough stuff.

*See, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch. Malachi 4:1*

Malachi, like most of the prophets, speaks of a day of judgement “when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble.”

The apostles speak everywhere of the wrath of God that will be poured out on the ungodly.

Jesus speaks about hell.

We all know John 3:16. But in the same passage is John 3:36 “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.*”

Now, talk of judgement and hell has often been brought into disrepute by preachers who have assumed that they know who is going there, and have delighted in telling them so. So let's not make that mistake.

But the Bible is clear that there will be a day of judgement when God's wrath will be poured out.

If you are a Christian you have nothing to fear, because, Jesus has already taken God's wrath upon himself on your behalf.

He died on the cross, and paid the price, that you need not fear condemnation – and that is the good news.

But there still will be a day of judgment at the End, when our good, loving, merciful, and yet dreadfully holy and just God will judge the world.

And, actually, we should rejoice that there will be a judgement at the End.

Would you really want a world where at the end of all things, God looked on all that had happened, all the sin and injustice, suffering and oppression, shrugged his shoulders and said “I don't care” “None of this matters”?

That would mean that the tyrants and abusers, the rapists and thieves, would never face the consequences:

That would mean that the oppressed and victimised, the downtrodden and suffering, would never be vindicated. The wrongs would never be righted.

No.

The end will be good.

It will be right and it will be fair.

And because God knew the consequences of sin, he sent his son into the world to make a sacrifice for sin, so that whoever believes should have eternal life.

That's a good end.

And Peter goes on to say to those who scoff and say “this will never happen” he goes on to say: “Are you sure? Are you really sure?”

Do you want to bet your life against the prophets and the apostles and Jesus himself?

Yes, the end has been a long time in coming.  
But God does not work by our watches.  
A day is like a thousand years, and he has got his long-term game plan.

He may seem to delay.  
But that is not so that we can go on living just as we want without sight of the end,  
and in total complacency of the short-term – rather it is to give us time to repent that  
when he comes it might be a good end for us.

And so this is the message as a whole:

God has an eternal plan.

He's started it, and he will finish it.

It began with the wonder of creation, in all its variety, surprise and beauty, after which  
God said "it is good"  
It will end in a day which is even better – which all the best in our life now is just a  
pointer towards.

Our God is not just the God of good beginnings; he is the God of great endings.  
He is a God of the long-term.  
He is a God who has his eye on the future.  
He is a finisher, and not a quitter.

And because our God is a finisher, so we are to be finishers too.  
We are to keep seeing this amazing worldview from start to finish so that it lifts our  
eyes to the future and makes us build for the long term.

We'll look at this more next week, but here these worlds in closing.

*11 Since all these things are to be dissolved in this way, what sort of people ought you  
to be in leading lives of holiness and godliness, <sup>12</sup>waiting for and hastening\* the  
coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set ablaze and  
dissolved, and the elements will melt with fire? <sup>13</sup>But, in accordance with his promise,  
we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.*

Live now, and live in light of this End.

Amen