



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"The Last Things I Want to Say"**
Comment: Insert Comment here
Author: The Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Isaiah 2: 1-5
Second Reading Romans 13:8-14
Gospel Matthew 24: 37-44

Last Tuesday, as the staff and I were having our lunch in the rectory, I felt my first earthquake- ever! It had to happen sometime while I'm living in the famous "Ring of Fire", and I seem to have slept through the minor tremors that have hit the region during the last eight years. It was a strange feeling, rather like starting to pass out. Rose, my housekeeper, quickly crossed herself, and I'm sure the rest of us felt thankful too that it was so minor. I got rather religious also back when "Millenio" came through town and uprooted all the mango trees in the garden. Very dramatic and, if I may say so, "Old Testament." No wonder our ancient forebears in the Faith saw God in the storm cloud. No wonder also natural phenomenon like fires, floods and earthquakes bring people to religion.

Something like that happened in Rome during the regime of the bishop Gregory the Great who lived from 540 to 604. One November, something like a hurricane hit the city and many people were killed. Being a good pastor, Gregory felt that the needed to help the people of Rome deal with the aftermath of the destruction. Deliberately changing the assigned readings for the following Sunday, he took as the Gospel text the passage that begins, "and there will be signs in the sun and moon and stars, and upon earth distress of nations." In his sermon that followed, he tried to show his people that the storm did not mark the end of the world, but that such an end would

nevertheless come and they needed to be prepared. It was duly noted in the manual of the Church in Rome that this particular Bible passage was used on this particular day. It was thought that the bishop had intended this to become a regular part of the Church year, with the result that the theme of Advent has ever afterwards been associated with the End Times, the Last Judgment, and the Life in the World to come. You would be surprised to learn just how many of our ancient and holy customs arose just as incidentally as that! But it perhaps shouldn't be surprising that God can use just such accidents of history to teach us important lessons.

So I thought to myself this week that I would follow this accidental tradition and speak about what the Church teaches about these "Last Things".

Looking in the Outline of the Faith, or the Catechism, at the back of the Prayer Book, I find these questions and answers beginning on p. 861 (if you want to follow along):

Q. What is the Christian hope?

A. The Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God's purpose for the world.

Later we read:

Q. What do we mean by heaven and hell?

A. By heaven, we mean eternal life in our enjoyment of God; by hell, we mean eternal death in our rejection of God.

We jump down to:

Q. What do we mean by the last judgment?

A. We believe that Christ will come in glory and judge the living and the dead.

Q. What do we mean by the resurrection of the body?

A. We mean that God will raise us from death in the fullness of our being, that we may live with Christ in the communion of saints.

Q. What do we mean by everlasting life?

A. By everlasting life, we mean a new existence, in which we are united with all the people of God, in the joy of fully knowing and loving God and each other.

We have come a long way from texts that used to give detailed descriptions of the life in the world to come, complete with pictures. We do not try to scare children into faith in a loving God by showing pictures of little demons with pitchforks stuffing them into the flames of hell. Neither do we promise the caricature heaven of fluffy clouds, halos and harps. Instead, what this very sparse outline provides is relationship as the foundation of our ultimate destiny- relationship with God, of course, but also our relations with those around us. This balance, traditionally seen in the basic form of the cross with its horizontal and vertical planes, is much healthier than a terrified affirmation of a set of doctrinal positions as a form of "fire insurance." Eternal life, certainly in its best form, is not to our way of thinking and teaching something that results from a particular formula or the performance of a particular rite, but from a life lived in and for the purpose that Jesus Christ came here in the first place- the reconciliation of the world to God and to itself. Into that fits things like his birth, his teaching, his suffering and his death, in addition to the resurrection that we have already mentioned and which is part of our Christian hope for the end both of our lives and of the world at large.

I usually don't try to encourage detailed speculation of what life in heaven, hell or any other ultimate destination is like. In the first place, our biblical tradition isn't consistent in its attempts to describe such an existence. In the Old Testament, it's Sheol- a place of shadows and gloom from which King Saul can call the Prophet Samuel like the ghost of Christmas past. Our Lord Jesus Christ uses the idea of paradise in his parables, but they are stories to make a point, not Lonely Planet guidebooks. More important than packing one's bags for the last trip, according to Jesus, is living in the Kingdom right now- accepting what God has already done for you, and the relationship with God that Jesus offers you out of love and gratitude, not fear. Fear has its place, mind you, and those who would tell you that hell is an outdated concept related to a vengeful and angry God not only doesn't take Jesus'

teaching seriously, but probably have problems raising well-behaved children, too! But I wouldn't use the fear of eternal hell as a tool except in the most drastic cases of people who think that God doesn't care or hold us accountable.

The fact of the matter is that the four weeks of the Advent season is schizophrenic. It can't make up its mind what message it wants to convey! And in addition it has the awful task of having to compete with the pre-Christmas season and the unrestrained use of Christmas themes and music throughout the commercial world. Most people don't want to think about their ultimate fate at this time of year...or any time of year, for that matter. But we will here, not because of good bishop Gregory and his hurricane, but because it will help us to understand the why and wherefore of the event we will celebrate on the night of the 24th and the Good News that this Gospel brings. What is the Good News of Advent? I find that in the last question asked in the Prayer Book Catechism, and the thought that I hope will carry us through until we start singing carols here in Holy Trinity, too:

Q. What, then, is our assurance as Christians?

A. Our assurance as Christians is that nothing, not even death, shall separate us from the love of God which in Christ Jesus our Lord.

That is the kind of "Last Things" that I want to share on this New Year's Day: something for us to look forward to far beyond Christmas, because God's love is forever.