

Trinity Sunday – Civic Sunday 2008

We shall not cease from exploration,
and the end of all our exploring
will be to arrive where we started
and know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown remembered gate
when the last of earth left to discover
is that which was the beginning.

Beginnings and Endings from TS Eliot's Little Gidding... And I'd like to begin by saying a big thank you to Donna Barker at the end of your Mayoral year and for all you've done for the people of this town. And I'd like to say a big welcome to Joyce Taylor at the beginning of your year as our new Mayor. It is a pleasure to have you with us on our Patronal Festival, Trinity Sunday.

Endings and beginnings...

The other night I was out collecting Christian Aid envelopes with my wife. We were collecting in a street near here that's become pretty expensive to live in. Outside one house were two luxury cars, 'his and hers' with personal number plates to match. A man seemed to be dusting one that was already gleaming. We said we'd come for the Christian Aid envelope. "My wife's out" was his gruff reply as he went back to his precious car. Each one of his cars could have saved the lives of 4,000 children in Burma, Zimbabwe or any of the poverty stricken countries in which Christian Aid works, and yet even £1 or 1 penny was too much for him to give. When that man reaches his end, as his life is played out before him, what will that meanness bring? What if God is that mean with him?

Others in the street gave much more generously, noticeably older people and others who seemed to have much less to spare themselves. Of such is the kingdom of heaven. For them their money will not end with that envelope, but will travel from their purse or wallet to every corner of the world bringing rays of love and laughter, helping to offer hope and new opportunities.

At their end, will God be generous like that with them?

These are the kind of questions that St Matthew loves to explore in his Gospel which we heard from today. In fact we heard the last words, the carefully crafted ending of his account of the life of Christ.

You'll know we have four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Four different pictures of the life of Jesus, reminding us that we never have Jesus sorted and fixed but need to discover him afresh again and again. Which do you tend to read from the most? Matthew recalls for us more of the teachings of Jesus than any other gospel, like a 'User's Guide to the Christian Faith.' He may not be as touchy-feely as Luke, or deep and mysterious as John, but I've come to appreciate the Teacher's Gospel more and more.

We're familiar with the beginning of Matthew, where he alone has Joseph's dream, wicked Herod and the wise men from the east. He too has the quote from Isaiah, 'A Virgin will conceive and bear a son and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which means, God with us.'

Now in this last paragraph the disciples are back in Galilee, back where they started from, but seeing it perhaps as if for the first time.

These few lines are filled with echoes from the Old Testament. The end of Jesus' time on earth fulfilling all that had begun long before. He speaks from the mountain top, just as God spoke to Moses from Mount Sinai, 'All authority is given to him' as was foretold in Daniel 7, and the instructions to make 'disciples of all the nations' are the way in which the ancient promise to Abraham will now be fulfilled through the church, that 'through you every nation upon earth will be blessed'

And finally in Matthew, as Jesus leaves them he says, 'Behold I am with you always, even to the end of time.' It's a strange thing to say at the sad moment of leave taking. But it's the final fulfilment of that beautiful prophecy, 'and his name shall be called Emmanuel, which means, God with us.' Just as the disciples lose sight of Jesus here, so they will discover Emmanuel in the midst of them in a new way through his Holy Spirit. And so will we.

On this Trinity Sunday, God the Father, is revealed to us by God the Son, Jesus, and will be with us always through God the Holy Spirit. The end of the story becomes the beginning of the next. Where will that story end for me? And for you?

To end, as we began, with TS Eliot,

"Quick now, here, now, always-
a condition of complete simplicity

(Costing ...not less ...than everything)"