

## The Alpha and the Omega

*Acts 11: 1-18, Psalm 148, Revelation 21: 1-6, John 13: 31-35*

The book of Revelation is always an interesting one on which to reflect and preach. Written at the end of the first century AD by John - who had, by this time, been driven into exile by the Emperor Domitian - it is a piece of scripture that is both a letter to fellow Christians and prophetic in nature. At that time, when the church was experiencing the beginning of terrible persecution, John writes about the ultimate victory and reign of Christ.

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: "See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them: he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."*

*And the one who was seated on the throne said:...I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end...*

Although, as a church in Australia, we do not experience the same persecution as the early church, or even that of the church in other parts of the world, as a parish community that is undergoing great change and uncertainty, in this season of resurrection we hear the words of Christ, through John, with deeper longing and renewed hope.

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. This is the great meta-narrative of our faith— the context in which all our stories unfold. It is both the story beyond our immediate circumstances, and a story of transformation.

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again; he is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. It is this essential truth that calls us into our life together as a community, and inspires and undergirds all ministry and mission. No matter what else is happening at the moment, this is the big picture, the grand vision we must hold onto.

It is easy for us to become overwhelmed by our immediate circumstances - the demands, the problems and issues that confront and confound us on a daily basis. All of a sudden small things can become big problems that serve to distract us from our essential calling as God's people, and distort our relationships with one another. We begin trying to fix things with more haste than wisdom; we panic about what *might* happen, instead of focussing upon who God is calling us to be; we begin operating in our own finite strength and flawed judgement. We forget the great meta-narrative of our faith – the ultimate story beyond our immediate circumstances, the power for transformation that undergirds our daily life.

At the other end of the scale, it is easy for faith communities to fall into complacency and pride in their own achievements. Gradually the grand vision becomes all about us rather than Christ, we begin to take each other for granted, and the spiritual disciplines of prayer, self-denial and repentance fade into the background. We forget that all we have comes from God, that our salvation and life are found in the Easter mystery, and that the kingdom we are called to build, is not our own, but Christ's.

There are many things that can cause us to lose sight of the greater vision. Another example could be the burden of leadership growing too heavy for some.

During the week in the morning daily office we read from Numbers 10, where Moses indulges himself in a long list of complaints about the problems he faces as the leader of God's people. I describe it as the typical clergy whinge about the congregation they have been given and how no one really appreciates how hard it is., however, I am sure that anyone who has exercised the ministry of leadership or organisation of anything in the church will understand what I mean! I have full sympathy for dear Moses – I don't think I could have done his job!

Sometimes we struggle with leadership because unrealistic expectations have been placed upon us – by others, or by ourselves; but most often, leadership has become a burden because we have tried to exercise it in our own strength, rather than through the strength, wisdom and power of Christ. Those in leadership especially, must constantly remind themselves of the ultimate story beyond the current issues and retain a firm faith in the transformative power of the gospel.

From time to time we will each experience a time in the spiritual wilderness, a dryness or barrenness in our spiritual life, a dark night of the soul. For me, these times are like entering into the silence of God – a silence that seems to be the absence of God. Times like this can be caused by illness, grief and trauma, or great anxiety about a situation, but they can also manifest themselves through self doubt, boredom in our spiritual life, or because we have become so busy with other things we have neglected our relationship with God. How hard it is to remember, reconnect with and reclaim God's ultimate story at times like this. Our own stuff seems to drown out everything else.

This is why it is so important that we continue to nurture our life together as a community, that we retell and reclaim the great meta-narrative of our faith when we meet together each week, so that those who cannot claim it for themselves at any one time, can have others claim it for them.

In our gospel reading today Jesus instructs his disciples to love one another as he has loved them. The love Jesus speaks of is not the warm fuzzy feeling of a Hallmark greeting card, but the deep, courageous, gracious, self-sacrificing love that perseveres through all circumstances.

When they are being persecuted, the disciples are to love one another, that others may know who Christ is. When they are facing the struggles and challenges of being and growing the church, they are to love one another, that others may come to know Christ. When we, as disciples, are dealing with change, uncertainty and all the anxiety that these bring, we too must love one another in all we do and say, so that others will come to know Christ, whom we follow.

Michael Leunig offers this brief but profound prayer poem on love:

*Love one another.*

*It is as simple and as difficult as that.*

Today, this parish community is experiencing the end of another chapter in its life together in ministry in this local area, and we wait now, for a new chapter to be written. It will be a chapter filled with individual stories, joys and celebrations, challenges and hardships, dreams, surprises and new

initiatives, success and failure, but I hope and pray that the grand vision, the real story undergirding it all and transforming it into glory, will be that of the risen Christ.

May you never forget who you are and to whom you belong.

The Lord be with you.