

## Sermon 16-7-23 (SC)

### 1 Peter 4: 7-19

This week, I just want to offer an exposition on verses 7 – 11, even though the appointed passage goes up to verse 19.

#### PRAYER

Last week, after I read my announcement in church, I thought to myself: “Well, that’s the hard bit out of the way. It doesn’t need to be a distraction. We can just focus on running this last leg well.”

But during the week, when I sat down to read through our passage today, I saw it began with the ominous words:

*Behold, the end of all things is at hand*

And I thought to myself, “well, that’s a bit dramatic.”

But that’s not a bad place to start exploring this passage. What did the apostle Peter mean when he wrote that back in the first century? – and what would it have meant for the Christian communities that first read it?

*Behold, the end of all things is at hand*

And here, I want to introduce you to a very interesting Greek word. *Telos*. *Telos*. You see in English, when we think of something coming to an end, the emphasis falls upon that point of termination. “This is when something began, and this is when it came to an end.” “This was the start, and this was the finish.” Cut and dry, black and white.

But the word *telos*, which is used here is much richer, much more enigmatic. It means, “having obtained the goal,” “having accomplished a purpose,” “of being fulfilled,” “of being made complete.” Unlike the English word “end”, the emphasis doesn’t leave us high and dry with nowhere else to go. Instead, the word “*Telos*” speaks about a fulfilled sense of purpose, which as we will see, gives us a *new* direction.

*Behold, the fulfilment of all things is at hand.*

But what exactly has been fulfilled for the apostle Peter, what great *Telos* is at hand? And I think I would summarise it like this: In Jesus, God has fulfilled his plan for his people. In Jesus, God has fulfilled his plan for his people.

The apostle Peter has written already about the hope that can be found through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He has talked about how the Spirit of Christ helps us to live up to our calling to be a holy people. And in chapter 4:5 which immediately precedes our passage today, Peter reminds us that Jesus will return to judge the living and the dead. In Jesus, God has fulfilled his plans for his people. Christ’s death and resurrection in the past means I can know the forgiveness of my sins and the hope of a new life. His sustaining Spirit in the present means I can live up to a high and holy calling. And the promise of his return in the future means I can trust there is an overriding sense of accountability that gives me comfort in the face of so much injustice.

And here is where I get to ask one of my favourite theological questions:  
But, so what? So what?

God has fulfilled his promises in Jesus, but what does that mean, or even, demand of me? What does that demand of the church?

Well, God's fulfilled plan for his people gives us a new sense of direction, as verse 7 continues:

*Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray.*

Our first response to God's fulfilled plan, the great telos, is a call to pray. We should always be in a posture of prayerful readiness. The church is only fit to deploy, ready to respond to the needs of its community and context, when it has been doing the hard work of daily prayer.

Now, every year, on this particular Sunday, I make *this* special prayer. "Please God, let the Wimbledon men's final finish before I have to leave for youth group."

But the tennis provides a helpful illustration here. In tennis, every phase of play begins with a serve. And whether we are watching the tennis live, or on telly, our focus is usually on the ball, on the player who is serving. But spend some time today looking at the player who is preparing to receive the serve. Look at their posture, look how they are preparing to read the ball, ready to move in a split-second left or right. They are in a posture of readiness.

That is a picture to which the church should aspire in prayer. The service game is coming our way, we must be ready. Hands clasped together in daily prayer.

How should the church respond to God's completed plan for his people – By adopting the posture of readiness in prayer.

<sup>8</sup> *Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.*

How should the church respond to God's completed plan for his people. Love each other deeply. For Love covers over a multitude of sins.

One of the things I have loved at St Paul's, is that we have been working together to build a culture where we can fail safely. And that is a precious, if not a strange-sounding thing. What I mean is this. This side of the pandemic we have tried a few things to engage our community, and some have worked well, but others have not. Our street parties, the community Christmas carols, our schools work, these have exceeded expectation, and we are right to celebrate them. But we should remember and be grateful for the things that haven't gone so well. Our coffee space for Ukrainian migrants last year didn't really take off as we hoped. Our warm-space soup lunches in the winter didn't really grow as we hoped. But we are so grateful to everyone who poured their energies into these initiatives, and we are genuinely grateful that they took place. Because if a church cannot fail well, it will never succeed. If there isn't sufficient love and trust to be creative, to try new things, if there is no willingness to take risks, to have a go, then you won't grow. But even more importantly, and this is the point: a church that *accepts* that some initiatives fail, is a church that is more likely to *accept* me when I fail. Now, I am sure that is a false equivalence on many levels, I know. But it might just be a helpful indicator: that the way a church makes and

protects that space to take risks, and to try new things, and to fail, is an insight into how they walk beside people, especially when they fail.

Love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins.

*<sup>9</sup> Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.*

How should the church respond to God's completed plan for his people – through hospitality. Don't just do it because there is a cultural expectation that it is what the church should do, or in the case of cultures of The Ancient Near East in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, there is an obligation to do it: but do it with sincerity. I think the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis has sharpened our minds and eyes to this. We are more alert to the fact that hospitality is the most effective form of pastoral care, and we shouldn't therefore reserve it for those who can help us climb a social ladder. The call to love and to practise hospitality go hand in hand.

Finally, from verse 10:

*<sup>10</sup> Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms. <sup>11</sup> If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.*

How should the church respond to God's completed plan for his people? - we should make space for people to exercise their gifts.

And I think this is where we have made great progress at St Paul's. We have always had a good reputation for our sense of welcome. But that message has deepened. Our message now is everyone is welcome *and has something precious to contribute to the community*. Not in some insincere or greedy way, but in a way that is open and vulnerable, that acknowledges we are each part of something bigger than ourselves.

In this way, there should always be a glorious messiness to the church, as it constantly adapts to and embraces the different gifts that people bring.

I often think about how we can extend that openness, about how we can responsibly embrace that glorious messiness that releases people into ministry, rather than into rotas.

So, in summary, the great telos is close by. God has fulfilled his promises to his people. The church responds by:

Adopting a posture of readiness in prayer  
Loving each other through failure  
Offering hospitality as an aspect of good pastoral care  
Being secure enough in itself to make space for other people's gifts.

Amen