

Easter 5: April 28, 2013

Acts 11:1-18

Psalm 148

Revelation 21:1-6

JOHN 13: 31-35

THE HOPE OF HEAVEN

“Almighty God, whom truly to know is everlasting life: Grant us so perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth and the life, that we may steadfastly follow his steps in the way that leads to eternal life.” Amen.

The Book of Revelation is the *strangest* book of the New Testament. There are great stretches of it which appear to have been written in code and the translation of the code has been lost, although the commentators I have read agree it was written to encourage Christians who were suffering brutal oppression at the hands of the Roman Empire. Some Christians revel in the Revelation to John and some are embarrassed by it and avoid it -- and so it was over 1,700 years ago when it was one of the last two books of the New Testament (along with Hebrews) to be admitted to the Canon of the New Testament.

Revelation is both very complex and very simple. There's a story about a Rector who had a doctorate (like me) and one day noticed that his church's sexton, on his break, was reading the Bible. "What book are you reading?" the rector asked. "The Book of Revelation," answered the sexton. "Ah, very complex, very difficult book," replied the learned rector. "What do you make of it?" The sexton looked at him, smiled and said, "**Jesus wins.**"

That is the shortest and best commentary on the Book of Revelation ever composed. It is due to this over-riding theme that Revelation is put at the very end of the Bible, because it focuses our attention on the Ultimate End of All Things: Jesus wins.

Sin is still present in our world, even after the decisive battle has been won on the cross by Christ, but ultimately, **Jesus wins**. Death is still present in this world, though we have hope right here and now for new life in heaven after our individual deaths, hope due to Christ's resurrection. And ultimately, as we heard in this morning's reading, "Death will be no more", because ultimately, **Jesus wins**.

Our three year cycle of Bible readings in the Sunday liturgy of the Revised Common Lectionary shared by us and several denominations includes passages from the Revelation to John on 10 occasions, five of which are during Easter Season of Year C -- this year, from Sunday, April 7 through next Sunday, May 5. We read Revelation in our liturgy when we are thinking about Last Things in the cosmic sense -- the End of History and the coming of the Kingdom of God, which is a particular theme in late November and early Advent, and when we are thinking about Last Things as individuals: our deaths and our hope for heaven, in Easter season.

My favorite biblical scholar is the late Raymond Brown, a Jesuit priest who taught at an ecumenical seminary (Union) and, unlike some writers about the Bible, was both a top-level scholar and extremely readable. His books The Birth of the Messiah and The Death of the Messiah became and remain both definitive scholarly works on the biblical narratives of Jesus' birth and death and also, as books like this go, popular.

After their publication, Professor Brown was asked if he would now be writing a book on the resurrection of the Messiah. He responded that no, he wouldn't; he'd rather hear about Jesus' resurrection first hand.

I hope we all hope to hear about Jesus' resurrection first hand, from Jesus, face to face.

That would mean being given new life after our individual deaths -- not new life because we are indestructible (we aren't) or because of some notion that we have immortal souls (we don't -- that's a concept of Greek philosophy, not Christianity) but because God through Christ can *give* new life as a *gift*.

What form that new life in heaven takes we don't precisely know. Jesus has not sent us a prospectus with floor plans and photographs such as one would want here on earth for a Life Care Community. What Jesus *has* assured us of is that he will be -- is, in fact -- in charge of the new life, which is enough for me.

If the brief flashes of what I might call *intense, exuberant serenity* which I have been blessed now and then to experience in this life are "appetizers" which give a taste of what the "heavenly banquet" may be like, well, I have a tiny sense of what "the peace of God which passes all understanding" might be like, both exhilarating and sublime, and better than any ecstasy we can experience in this life. Which is saying something.

We prayed in today's collect "that we may steadfastly follow Christ's footsteps in the way that leads to eternal life." The collect also declares that new life can start in this life, and last week we heard from Deacon Cathy how dramatically that new life can burst into and transform a life which had been galloping towards death. We hear in today's passage from Acts how the invitation by God to *life* in its fullness has been extended to the whole world and all its people. We hear in today's passage from Revelation -- a passage often read at funerals in The Episcopal Church -- Jesus promise "to the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life."

And we also hear words from Jesus in today's Gospel which remind us that even -- and perhaps especially -- when we are contemplating our own mortalities as individuals and our personal hopes for heaven for ourselves, that we "love one another."

Therefore, especially now in this season of hope and of the beauty of Spring, **we should write our wills.**

Oh, some people might say, "Wills are just for old people." The man whose memorial service I presided over after he was killed in the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 wasn't old at all. Thirty-two. Didn't expect to die that day when he left for work. He left a wife and a two year old son. People die all the time at various ages from all sorts of causes, including those as mundane and unpredictable as car crashes. You never know.

Oh, some people may say, "Wills are just for rich people." Actually, people named Buffet or Gates or Rockefeller have money to burn on attorneys to clean up any messes they might leave behind. Most of us don't have money to burn, money which would be burned if we don't have wills spelling out our wishes for who gets what.

Oh, some people may say, "It will all work out the way I want anyway without my writing a will." Well, if you want the State of New Jersey to be in charge of the disposition of all of your worldly goods and money, and if you have minor children and you want the State of New Jersey to pick who takes care of them, you're right, but *some* people wouldn't want to sign over that much power to the government. Maybe you do. Maybe you already have, simply by not writing down your own wishes.

We have as an insert to today's service leaflets what is called the "Jane Doe/John Doe will", which the State has written for those who die with no will. *If you have not written a will, this is what you have.*

Please note that the will spells out exactly who gets what share of your money and property, including specifying that “if none of the above-named relatives survives me, I give my entire estate to the State of New Jersey.” Do you like that plan?

How about: “Under existing law, there are certain legitimate avenues open to me to lower estate and/or inheritance taxes. Since I prefer to have my money used for governmental purposes rather than for the benefit of my family, I direct that no efforts be made to lower such taxes.” Do you like that plan? The State does. And let’s remember, while the *federal* estate tax exemption has been raised in recent years, New Jersey taxes any estate worth over \$675,000 -- which in this area would apply to a lot of people with houses who don’t think of themselves as rich -- and New Jersey *inheritance* tax applies to estates of any size.

Of course, if you’d rather have your money used for governmental purposes, that’s not a problem.

And the clincher is for anyone who has a child under 18 years old, because if you have not written a will, you have waived your right to name a guardian for your child or children. Read what happens then. Think about it.

And if you *have* written a will, pull it out and read it and see if it needs to be updated. When my son turned 18, I no longer had to name a guardian for him, but provisions for him as an adult were needed.

Not only is Heaven glorious, it also is *paid for*. Look over to my right at the crucifix near the chapel. Christ has already paid the price for you and me and all who turn to him in faith. So, not only *can’t* we “take it with us”, as the saying goes, but we don’t have to. We won’t need our money. Eternal life is priceless, and it’s paid for by the priceless gift of Jesus’ self.

The Book of Common Prayer, page 445, says, “The Minister of the Congregation is directed to instruct the people, from time to time, about the duty of Christian parents to make prudent provision for the well-being of their families, and of all persons to make wills, while they are in health, arranging for the disposal of their temporal goods, not neglecting, if they are able, to leave bequests for religious and charitable purposes.”

You may decide “to leave bequests for religious and charitable purposes” so as to make your generosity last longer than your lifetime. Unless you’d rather have your money used for governmental purposes.

If you would like to consider including Christ Church in your estate plans, I would urge you to speak with one of our wardens, Paul Ambros or Don Edwards, or to me. You would be following in the footsteps of people whose generosity has added to the financial strength Christ Church has, strength which is primarily based on the regular generosity of people who make annual financial pledges, but which has been supplemented significantly by bequests.

I would urge you to speak with someone before you finalize your plans because sometimes well-meaning people do things which were not, frankly, well-advised. One church I know received a bequest which was limited in how it could be spent to printing the rector's sermons. That's it. A number of churches I know had devoted parishioners who thought they were leaving money to their church, but whose bankers persuaded them to make a trust with the bank as perpetual trustee entitled to perpetual trustee fees, with the church getting whatever income might be available after fees, and never having access to the principal. That was a gift *to* the church but *for* the bank.

So, if you would like to be generous toward this church in your estate planning, that's wonderful; let's talk. There are a number of *good* options.

Second, when you write or update your will, please make sure you have an up-to-date living will and a Power of Attorney. People sometimes have periods of time when they are unable to make medical decisions for themselves. Who makes those decisions? Especially if they are single, the answer would not be obvious to a doctor. And *what* decisions would a person want made on his or her behalf? Please pick up a copy of the booklet Five Wishes in the back of the church to help you address these issues. I would be happy to meet with anyone to discuss any of these issues as well.

People may be temporarily or permanently unable to make other decisions for themselves, so a Power of Attorney is needed in which they name the person, and the back up, to make those decisions.

With all of these documents, you can't get them if you don't have them and really need them. My brother-in-law has Alzheimer's Disease. My sister can no longer count on him to be able to make the kind of decisions for her that a spouse would normally be called upon to make. She made the decision to update her documents and name other people besides him to make medical and other decisions, thankfully, *before* anything happened to her.

It's like life insurance. The time to buy life insurance is when you're healthy. Try getting it after getting a cancer diagnosis.

I also have in the back of the church copies of some articles which Gwen Greenberg wrote a few years ago for our parish newsletter on all these topics, which I commend to you. Thank you, Gwen.

All these are sobering subjects. We can approach them calmly and with hope, because Christ is risen. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

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