

Nothing Lasts Forever...but Life

Preached by the Right Reverend Grant Lynn Ford at the Sunshine Cathedral on Sunday, November 18, 2007.

THE WRITTEN WORD

The Light of the Ages

Isaiah 13:9-8

⁹The day of the *Eternal* is coming—a fierce day, with wrath and frightening anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the wrongdoers within it. ¹⁰The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not shine. ^{11a}I will punish the world for its evil, the wicked for their sins.

The Light from a Teacher of Truth

The Art of Worldly Wisdom - Baltasar Gracian

To last an eternity requires an eternity of preparation. Only excellence counts; only achievement endures.

The Light of the Master Teacher

Luke 21:5-9, 17-19

⁵Some of his student were admiring the Temple, with its beautiful decorations and memorial gifts. Jesus said to them,

⁶“Know this: nothing material lasts forever! The day will come when this will all be a pile of rubble, every stone knocked down flat!”

⁷“Teacher,” they asked, “this is *really* going to happen? When? And how will we know? What should we watch for?”

⁸“Watch out so you’re not duped and deceived,” he replied. “All kinds of people will come along, saying, ‘I’m the one!’ or ‘The time is coming!’ Well, don’t run after them. ⁹You’ll hear of revolutions and riots. Don’t be afraid! It’s not the End of All Things. These things happen.”

¹⁷“Everyone on earth may hate you because of me. ¹⁸But not one hair on your head will be harmed. ¹⁹By not giving up you gain life!”

THE PROCLAIMED WORD

There are some axioms that just bear repeating. You know, those pithy sayings that simply ring true the very first time you hear them. Such as, “If at first you don’t succeed, then skydiving isn’t for you.” Or, “A day without sunshine is like, well...night.”

How about this one? “A clear conscience is usually the sign of a bad memory.” And then there’s: “42.7% of all statistics are made up on the spot.”

This one will make you think: “Despite the cost of living, have you noticed how popular it remains?” And don’t look around when I remind you: “Half the people you know are below average.”

This is my personal motto: “I intend to live forever; so far so good.”

It’s not surprising, then, to hear some interesting statements in our readings this morning.

Baltasar Gracián was a 17th century preacher, writer and rebellious Jesuit priest. Today he is known as the quintessential Spanish baroque writer, though in his day he was known to play pranks, even in the pulpit. One Sunday his sermon was a so-called letter from hell, which got him in trouble with his superiors. But his quote that we read today really makes us stop and think. “Only excellence counts; only achievement endures.”

It brings us to the words of Jesus, when he tells his students: “Know this: nothing material lasts forever!”

We don’t like to hear that. We want to go on forever. We want our life to remain the same, only more comfortable, with more gadgets and goodies.

All this talk about the End Times is distressing. As the prophets cry out: “The stars of heaven and their constellations will not show their light. The rising sun will be darkened and the moon will not shine.” So what is all this about “the day of the Eternal ...a fierce day, with wrath and frightening anger”?

Well, of course, prophets like to scare their listeners. But when we put apocalyptic language into context, within the hopeful message of the Bible, the ‘day of the Eternal’ is not quite so scary. All this business of a cosmos in turmoil reminds us that we as a human race—on a grand scale—are in constant evolution, changing and growing. Why, even the Sunshine Cathedral—on a more local scale—is changing and growing, and it causes some of us to experience anxiety and stress. But it’s not the end of the world, and it’s not the end of the church.

There is this strange little book at the back of your Bible called *The Revelation of St. John the Divine*. If at all possible, ignore it. Otherwise, please take note: it was undoubtedly not written by the Apostle John. It is most likely at least three different documents.

Chapters one through three are letters to seven different actual churches that really existed in Asia Minor at the end of the first century. They are Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Philadelphia, and Laodicea. These letters have been allegorized to death, but they were real letters from a prison chaplain on the Island called Patmos. The African

bishop Dionysius, in the third century, calls him John the Presbyter or John the Elder. He lived on the Island of Patmos, in the Aegean Sea, off the coast of what we would today call Turkey.

Chapters four has a different flavor. I tend to agree with those who say it was a theological treatise based on a communion liturgy used in the church on Patmos.

The rest of the book was to the church back then as *Star Wars* is to us today. Science fiction tells us what *could* happen, not what *will* happen. The same is true of apocalyptic or prophetic literature.

Barbara Marx Hubbard is what we call a futurist. In 1984 her name was placed into nomination for Vice President at the Democratic National Convention. Paul Ray, author of *The Cultural Creatives*, calls her “an American original . . . one of the great visionaries of our time.” She even wrote quite a commentary on the book of Revelation, taking a much more positive view of this business of The End Times.

In an online interview, she spoke of the tragedy of 9-11 and other cataclysmic events in the world, looking for hope “in every great tragedy, if there is some sense of deeper meaning...”

She points to examples such as “people in concentration camps, people in the most terrible situations as POWs,” saying that “it is said that when they had a sense of faith and hope they could make it through.”

She continues: “If you have no sense of faith and hope and think it’s a totally meaningless act, it’s almost intolerable. If you think that underneath this terror, this horror and this suffering that there could be a stimulus for millions, if not billions, of people to say: ‘Let’s go for healing; let’s go for caring for each other; let’s go for cooperation...’”

In other words, she points out that the future has alternate possibilities, just like prophetic writings. The choice of what we do about it will make the difference as to the world we create for ourselves and our descendants.

Victor Frankl, the founder of the “Third Viennese School” of psychotherapy, or Existential Analysis, says: “We who lived in concentration camps can remember [those] who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a [person] but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

Barbara Marx Hubbard calls all these turmoils ‘birth pangs’ as we move into a new millennium. She says, “I would like to see an uprising of responsibility in social wellness and healing come out of this...”

And this is what Jesus is calling us to, when he warns us, “Watch out so you’re not duped and deceived. All kinds of people will come along, saying, ‘I’m the one!’ or ‘The time is coming!’ Well, don’t run after them. You’ll hear of revolutions and riots. Don’t be afraid! It’s not the End of All Things. These things happen.”

Even Jesus doesn’t get all upset with apocalyptic grumblings. Sure, he says, “Know this: nothing material lasts forever!” But he ends up by saying, “By not giving up you gain life!”

Victor Frankl also says, “Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for.”

But our shared ministry gives meaning to my life. It’s true that I am no longer the Canon Pastor of this church. It’s also true that I am Dean of the finest Cathedral in Christendom, and because I so passionately believe in our shared vision and ministry, with the Reverend Canon Durrell Watkins leading the way, I am increasing my giving by 25% beginning January 1, 2008. I believe in what we are doing, and I believe we are creating a new world with our shared ministry.

When your turn comes to make your pledge, I hope you’ll join me in a very generous way, and that you’ll be proud to give with great joy.

We are making a world of a difference for people right here in South Florida. We are helping to save lives in Jamaica and soon throughout the Caribbean. With our MCC partners around the world we are helping to usher in a new age of tolerance and respect, of love, consideration and compassion... that will make Jesus proud. Why? Because we are continuing the work he started, the work he then assigned for us to do.

Nothing lasts forever...but life itself. That’s what Jesus said: “By not giving up you gain life!”

And that’s the truth!

THE GIVING WORD

Victor Frankl says, “Our main motivation for living is our will to find meaning in life.”

THE FINAL WORD

This final word from the great Universalist preacher Kenneth Patton: “By the choices and acts of our lives, we create the person that we are and the faces that we wear. By the choices and acts of our lives we give to the world wherein our lives are lived, hoping that our neighbors will find our contributions to be of worth, and hoping that the world will be a little more gracious for our time in it.”