

## Reflection for September 6, 2020

### **Time—Like An Ever-Rolling Stream**

*Owe no one anything, except to love one another;*

*Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep.*

*Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.*

*Our living of the gospel makes us part of this communion of saints, experiencing the fulfillment of God's reign even as we actively anticipate a new heaven and a new earth.*

May the peace of the Lord be with you always.

Let us pray:

*Good morning, God. Thank you for the invitation to live faithfully today, walking in your paths, loving my neighbour. The day is new, unmarred by missteps or words misspoken, so I pause in this newness to remember your commandments and to delight in them. Help me to follow you all through this day. Keep my feet from stumbling or wandering down other trails so that I honour you and others in word and deed. In Christ I pray. Amen.*

Katie Mack, a theoretical astrophysicist and the author of *The End of Everything (Astrophysically speaking)*, explains that, "Before Einstein came along with his relativity theory, we thought both space and time were not only real, but immutable: Time ticks along the same for everyone, space is just the giant invisible grid through which we move. But relativity forced us to adjust our thinking to include the possibility that both space and time are malleable and intertwined, affecting each other in counterintuitive ways. How you move through space affects

time, and space itself can change shape as time passes. We now think of space and time tied up into a kind of universal, stretchy fabric we call space-time. For months now, we've all been trying to build some kind of stable existence on top of a foundation that is suddenly less solid than we would have liked to believe. Many of us find our universes dramatically confined, as we walk our tiny circles around our allotted patches of space, feeling time stretch and squeeze and loop back upon itself as one month lasts four years and another is over in a week. Our view of the past is blurry and indistinct; the future completely obscured. Our nearest friends and family are now impossibly distant; strangers at the grocery store alarmingly close."

When the apostle Paul writes to the congregation at Rome regarding relationships with others in the community, he counsels, "Owe no one anything, except to love one another," which seems like a rather large "except." Three verses later Paul adds, "Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near." Knowing what time it is helps Christians to know what is important and what is not.

"Let us then," continues Paul, "lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us love honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy" (Rom. 13:8, 11-13). Where are things heading? What does the future hold? Will history, as we know it, have an end or consummation? And what happens to us when our own endings come? Is there a final judgment? Will Christ come again? All of these are eschatological questions. From the Greek term meaning "the last things," is derived the theological term eschatology.

The doctrine of eschatology summarizes Christian convictions regarding the fulfillment, destination, and end of life. You may have detected a certain ambiguity in these words. The last things, the fulfillment,

destination, and end, cover a lot of ground and include many different questions. Does “last things” refer to a chronological end to the world? Or do these terms denote something slightly different: the *ultimate* end, as in the goal and purpose of history? Is this eschatology thing about the future of all life? Or is it mainly about individual lives, my life, the lives of those I love, and what happens to us after we die?

Biblical thought is linear, not cyclical. Time does not move in an ever-repeating circle. It moves from beginning to end, from creation to consummation. “So teach us to count our days,” writes the psalmist, “that we may gain a wise heart” (Ps. 90:12). Anthony Robinson writes: “Life is short and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those with whom we walk the way. So be swift to love, make haste to be kind, in the name of our companion on the way, Jesus the Christ.”

Do we know what time it is? When it comes to framing that question as well as providing hope for the future, the language of Scripture is the language of metaphor and symbol. This language attempts to express what cannot be fully expressed in words. In the end, affirms Paul, God triumphs over death. This language is more poetic than scientific. Perhaps for this reason such themes and texts are often best conveyed through hymns and music.

*Time like an ever-rolling stream soon bears us all away, we fly forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day. O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, be thou our guard while troubles last, and our eternal home.*

*My Lord, what a morning. My Lord what a morning. My Lord, what a morning when the stars begin to fall. You'll hear the trumpet sound to wake the nations underground, Looking to my God's right hand when the stars begin to fall.*

The language of these hymns is not the language of prediction; it is the language of hope, that is, faith applied to the future.

Thomas Homer-Dixon reflects on the audacity of holding hope: “As we face enormous challenges, some of us retreat to focus on things close to us in time and space, such as our friends and family, in person and on social media. Others try denial, maybe by claiming that the evidence for problems such as climate change and even pandemics is invented by people who benefit from scaring us. Or we become fatalistic, declaring we can’t do anything about the problems because we’ve gotten used to a way of living, or because the problems are the fault of the rich, or the poor, or immigrants, minorities, or “them over there”—anybody but us. Some of us rally to autocratic leaders who tell a simple story about what’s wrong and declare they can make things better with bold, harsh action. Anxiety about the future, detachment, self-deception, and feelings of resentment and helplessness—this is a perilous psychological state, the starting line of a fast track to the end of hope. It also makes the future we fear far more likely to happen, because the best way to ensure we’ll fail to solve our problems is to believe we can’t. To believe in the possible and to make the possible real, we must recognize that the right kind of hope can be a tool of change, and we must give our hope the muscle it requires in our present crisis.”

The God we trust in our present life is the God we also trust in the future. Whether the concern is the with the end and consummation of all life or the final completion and destiny of our personal lives, Christian faith affirms that history moves toward conclusion and that the end is God.

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another.”

When faced with a plague, the early Christians would nurse people, sometimes saving lives, sometimes dying themselves. Their strong belief in God’s promises for life beyond the grave gave them a fearlessness which enabled them both to keep cheerful in the face of death and to go the aid of sufferers whose own families and communities had abandoned them for fear of the disease. The way

Christians behaved in the great plagues of the early centuries was a significant factor in contributing to the spread of the faith. To treat one another with love is to wear Jesus Christ like a garment we “put on.”

Tom Wright thinks of eschatology not as passive but as participatory. He writes: “Paul is not, then proposing a Christian version of Stoicism. He is offering a Jesus-shaped picture of a suffering, redeeming providence, in which God’s people are themselves not simply spectators, not simply beneficiaries, but active participants. They are ‘called according to his purpose’, since God is even now using their groaning, at the heart of the world’s pain, as the vehicle for the Spirit’s own work, holding that sorrow before the Father, creating a context for the multiple works of healing and hope. Such God-lovers are therefore shaped according to the pattern of the Son: the cruciform pattern in which God’s justice and mercy, his faithfulness to the covenant and to creation, are displayed before the world in tears and toil, lament and labour. This is our vocation in the present time” (God and the Pandemic, p. 51).

May it be so. Thanks be to God.

Let us pray:

*May our offering—in whatever form it is given—be a sign of our celebration of your saving love and your never-failing grace, O God. Just as our worship stands as a perpetual observance of your love and care, so may our offering be a perpetual observance of your love in our lives. Amen.*

*Rev. Bill Cantelon*