

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

The end is nigh has been a familiar refrain for centuries. Whether the end has been announced by prophets or con artists, Christianity is a religion that has encouraged reflections on the end times. And while much of the time the end has actually been not remotely nigh, this week it rings true. For in our cycle of scripture readings, our lectionary, this week and next we are in true end times.

We are at the end of the church year, and it is appropriate that as our liturgical year draws to an end so our readings call us to reflect on the theology of the end times. This year there is also a particularly poignant conclusion to our celebration of the liturgical year. For several decades the church has been using the same set of readings, spread out in three year cycles, with which to explore the liturgical year. But this year that old three year cycle will conclude for the last time.

Its not that we won't hear many, indeed, most of the familiar readings that we have heard in previous years. Instead, in two weeks time on the first Sunday of Advent the Episcopal Church officially moves on to a new way of dividing up the scriptures to be heard in public worship. This week is therefore the penultimate week for us to hear the scriptures read from the old lectionary. Starting on Advent Sunday St Thomas in common with most Episcopal Churches will follow the Revised Common Lectionary or RCL for short.

So what makes the RCL different from our current lectionary? Well, to be honest, very little when it comes

down to what you actually hear on a Sunday. But the really significant thing about the shift to the RCL is that we will finally be using a set of readings that is not just the set the Episcopal Church uses. Instead, our Sunday readings will be theoretically exactly the same as those used within many of the major denominations, including our Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and UCC neighbors in Hanover.

In a world where we see ever greater fragmentation and disagreements between peoples, the RCL is a potent sign of the unity that can exist between people even while they retain their different identities.

And this time next year, even using the new RCL, we will still be gearing up for the end of the liturgical year.

Which brings us back to the question. What are as Christians to make of this whole question of the end times? I don't know about you, but I am not a fan of certain Christian books like the Left Behind Series, a literalist fantasy about how the end of time will happen. Nor am I a great fan of the endless apocalyptic movies that play on a somewhat unhealthy fascination with scenes of mass destruction and carnage. So what would it mean then to talk about the end times with less emotional charge and without the ubiquitous presence of an Arnold Schwarzenegger, Keanu Reeves or a Bruce Willis?

I think the answer is within each one of us. And I think the answer has a lot to do with the mundane simplicity of the words of our second reading. If we are to await the end times as an irruption of cataclysmic Armageddon into our normal lives we are going to be doing a lot of waiting. But if we are open to the existential aspect of the end times,

then I think we might start to see something positive in Christian talk about the end.

On a simple everyday level none of us knows where the end is going to come. But as mortals, we know it will come some day. And at the end of the liturgical year, this is an important time for us to reflect on how well prepared we are for that end. Before we get caught up in the eager anticipation that is Advent, the next two weeks our readings ask us to ponder our mortality and our relationship to Christ.

As you ponder that, spare some thought for the Temple that Jesus rightly predicts will be destroyed in our Gospel reading. According to the historian Josephus the Temple, and here I quote, “was covered all over with plates of gold of great weight, and, at the first rising of the sun, reflected back a very fiery splendour, and made those who forced themselves to look upon it to turn their eyes away, just as they would have done at the sun's own rays.”

The Temple was the greatest building that Jesus would ever see. And as such it represented permanence, beauty, and above all the power of the then religious and economic system of relating to God. To compare it today to any current building is simply impossible, as no single building today represents the kind of political, religious and economic power all wrapped up in one blindingly brilliant architectural configuration. But it was this that Jesus says will fall. As it did.

The tottering of the Temple is a powerful reminder today that even the most grandiose human achievements are

transient. And when our end comes, as it surely will, the question remains what will be our legacy?

For the longest time I could not abide the phrase in the Nicene Creed where we recite that Jesus will come to judge the living and the dead. To be honest most of the time I still don't think I particular want to be judged. But then I realized that the judgment that is being talked about is not going to be the kind of judgment meted out by an irascible federal court judge. No, the judgment that the Creed is actually talking about is what it will mean to finally meet our creator face to face. In that encounter I do not believe God will much judge us so much as exercise good judgment. And exercising good judgment will mean God finally helping us understand and make sense of who we are, both what we have been and what we hope to be.

It is true that we will want to be prepared for that encounter. But we do not need to prepare out of fear. Instead we need to be prepare ourselves to be ready for an encounter with the colossal love that is God's very being.

A life lived apart from at least some small signs of love will no doubt make that encounter uncomfortable. For to be properly understood we have to be capable in turn of understanding what love really is. By contrast a life lived working out what love demands of us in this life, will make us ready for that encounter. For at the very end when we meet the source of all love we are offered graceful reconciliation with the love from which we ourselves have learnt how to love.

In case this sounds like a lot of speculation about things that can never be known, I want to stress that the end times can never be a simply chronological matter to do with our final days. Eschatology, which is simply a clever word for thinking about the end, is always with us. It is with us in our everyday choices, choices that we make every day, and not just in the two week period that is the culmination of the liturgical year or our last hours.

If we are to live eschatologically, we need to continually look for the ultimate in the every day. We need to become schooled in loving for the sake not of an ultimate reward, but for the sake of love itself. Love alone begets true love. And unless we love purely for the sake of love, we risk having misunderstood God.

I don't think God does wants us to be particularly religious in our eschatological deliberations. Rather, I believe God wants us to turn our hearts and heads to doing something about the tradition of love that we have inherited. Meditating upon our eternal soul is not particularly eschatological. Instead working for the good of our neighbors and for the needy has been a consistent eschatological theme in the scriptures. As Jesus says, you can expect bad things will indeed happen to us. But if we seek to protect ourselves rather than lose ourselves in service to others, we will not have learned love's story. To be sure this is counter intuitive. But the truth remains: love alone has no end. And so the more we love, the more we live. Amen.