



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Priest-in-Charge

Holding Fast

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, November 25, 2012

The Last Sunday after Pentecost, Christ the King

Based on Revelation 1:4b-8 and John 18:33-37

Yesterday I had a good bit of time in an airport lounge waiting to return home after a visit with the largest gathering of my quite small family in years. Attempting to tweak a sermon in an airport, even in the Sky Club, is difficult under any circumstances and doing so after overdosing for a couple of days on Southern dishes, the quality of which is judged by the amount of fat and sugar per molecule, while balancing a set of large personalities, all with strong ideas about what life should look like in our shifting familial dynamic—well, let's just say that preaching on the Book of Revelation this morning actually makes a good bit of sense! And that, my friends, is a bit scary.

Even if I were not just back from a brush with the apocalypse, gastronomic and otherwise, I would still believe that we make a mistake if we totally disregard the Book of Revelation as an almost embarrassing collection of bizarre analogies and predictions. Some think this writing should have ended up on the floor of the canonical editing room hundreds of years ago. As early as the second century many were beginning to question the book's usefulness to the church, an attitude toward Revelation that continues to this day and one that I more or less share. And yet, while it is not exactly my late night reading—nor do I particularly recommend that it become yours—I find it highly creative and fanciful, elusive and mystical, and filled with images that have been the muse for many an interesting canvas in Christian art through the ages.

Most of its most exotic players—four dramatically stylized horses, a beast rising up from the ocean in a way that even Disney could not imagine, and a group of locusts as big as horses with huge teeth sharp as those belonging to a bunch of lions—were part of the apocalyptic culture of the era, having been around since the time of the writing of several Old Testament books, *Ezekiel* and *Joel* and a couple of hundred years later *Daniel*. Put all that dramatic imagery alongside a good old-fashioned fight between good and evil, and what you have is the Book of Revelation.

But none of that drama is the text of my sermon today. I am using one of its tamer and most famous verses: "*I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.*"

Tame but far from insignificant. It falls into the category of one of those great verses that almost literally rise up from the pages, demanding to be contemplated and remembered. In many ways it is the basis of our theology of God—that God was, is, and will be forever more. Additionally, I think that this verse helps us grapple with this particular day in the life of the church year, the last day of the church year, a day with which we as modern people struggle every year. Today we somewhat uncomfortably celebrate "the Reign of Christ" or, more traditionally,, "Christ the King" Sunday.

There are good reasons that our language and emphasis today cause us to think and to re-imagine. To celebrate the reign of Christ in our lives without buying into the triumphalism (our way or the highway!) that has plagued the church for two millennia is a challenge; and, yet, in the pluralism that is our global and local reality, we somehow have to rise to that challenge. While Christ is everything to us, we must be able to admit that other religions have equally valid claims about their truth and that their truth doesn't have to be untrue just so that ours is true. If we can admit that truth (at least as I see it) without experiencing Christ or our faith as diminished, we have come a long way from a time when *Christus rex* was not just our faith but our battle cry.

As is our custom every year, this past week we observed a service of Thanksgiving with several nearby communities of faith, Christian, Jewish and Muslim. It was as it always is a good feeling, but we need to be clear about what we are saying when we confess a common devotion to God, when we offer our thanks for the bounty of our lives and when we implore the God of creation to bring us God's peace. We are not doing it with a wink and a nod, not with some secret sense that someday "they" will find out that "we" are really right and "they" are really wrong. In true interfaith work we admit that we do not have the final word on religion, even our own. We admit that we are responsible for the validity of our faith only, not someone else's, and that understanding the validity of our own is a lifelong process of conversion, one act of love at a time.

That is not as innocuous as it sounds. I made this essential argument in an article I wrote this week; and though there was much positive response, it was not unanimously so. Some honestly believe that interfaith co-existence is the best we can hope for, that we must indeed be respectful, if for no other reason than self-preservation, but that to be authentic Christians we have to *know* that *in the end* ours is the only right way. I got that loudly and clearly in some responses. Trust me: I got it loudly and clearly.

It is at this point in the discourse that a verse like this one from the Book of Revelation—*I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty*—is so helpful. We claim what we can share: that God is. How we come to understand God is almost universally a matter of the community to which we were born. It is just not correct to suggest that I am a Christian because it is the only right religion; the truth is I am from a long line of Christians—a good many of them Methodist and Presbyterian ministers with an occasional Anglican thrown into the mix to shake things up a bit. Were my last name a little less Anglo-Saxon than Stallings or my place of birth on the other side of the globe, you can be sure pretty sure I'd be something other than Christian. But with luck and grace, I'd still know that God is the Alpha and the Omega—that God was and is and is to come.

Within orthodox belief and practice, I believe it is not only possible to make the claim I am making here but imperative to do so if we are to live in a way that emulates Jesus. But here is the danger: be clear that this is not an invitation to believing less or becoming what some in the world have called us mainline folks—tepid, milquetoast religious dilettantes who are so open and accepting that we don't really believe much of anything. God deliver us from that! We are called to be passionate Christians, people who are ardently devoted to living in a way that is based upon what we know and believe about the life of Jesus—the same Jesus who never claimed to be a king but to be the one who would be known as a servant, a lover, a compassionate Son of Man, the one who said, "Love God with all your heart, soul and mind and your neighbor as yourself, and let the rest take care of itself."

We don't need to be converting people; that is the domain of God. What we are called to do is to love—to love in the way that we believe Jesus loved. On Christ the King Sunday, we do well to heed this reminder: humility in the practice of our faith is much more reminiscent of the way Jesus was than is parading Christ around as the one and only way.

If we hold fast to that which we believe to be true, that to which we can give our hearts—that God is, was and will be—and if we love with rapt abandon, we will be fine and in the process we will be a part of bringing the realm of God on earth!

In the name of God: *Amen*.

©2012 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission
write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212-378-0222, or visit stbarts.org.
St. Bart's, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022