

# "I am.... the Alpha and Omega"

Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2010

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## Readings:

Revelation 21: 1 – 6

John 13: 31 - 38

Today we are beginning a new series of sermons based on what Jesus said about himself and today's theme is based on the last verse that Jackie read: "I am the Alpha and Omega".

There are lots of "I ams" that Jesus said which we can probably more easily relate to. There is an obvious instant picture for the light of the world, the bread of life, the good shepherd, the true vine... and we'll come to all these and more besides over the coming months.

So.... how would you illustrate the Alpha and Omega? In church circles Alpha usually means the course - but that wasn't what Jesus was referring to!

Likewise when he said Omega he wasn't talking expensive watches, or healthy fish oils - it's far simpler than that.

The New Testament was originally written in Greek and the first letter of the Greek alphabet is Alpha and the last letter is Omega, with these symbols...so for our culture we could think of Jesus saying "I am the A-Z, The beginning and the end".

In Easter 2008 Tom and Dave and Josh and Morgan and Jennie Bancroft were sponsored by some of us here today, to read the whole Bible aloud from cover to cover, 24 hours around the clock, taking turns to read and eat and sleep, starting after the Good Friday Service, pausing to join in the Easter Day celebrations, and finally finishing in the early hours of Monday 3 days and nights to raise money to buy a goat for an orphanage in Zimbabwe.

But mostly when we read the Bible, whether on our own at home, or in a homegroup or at some other church gathering, we tend to read little bits of it, which is fair enough as we couldn't read the whole lot in a morning service if it takes that long to read it nonstop!

But we do need to read those little bits in the context of the whole story ... and when we have Communion services the words we use help us to do that:

*He (Jesus) is your living word;*

*through him you have created all things from the beginning  
and formed us in your own image.*

*Through him you have freed us from the slavery of sin,  
giving him to be born of a woman and to die upon the cross,  
you raised him from the dead and exalted him to your right hand on high.*

*Through him you have sent upon us your holy and life-giving Spirit,  
and made us a people for your own possession.*

Another of the Communion liturgies we use has the repeated line for us to join in  
*This is his story – this is our song.*

The Bible begins "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" ... and the Spirit of God is mentioned in the second verse, and in that same chapter God says "let us make man in our image"

God the Son isn't directly mentioned in Genesis ... but if we look at the beginning of John's Gospel in the New Testament we read John beginning: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning."

Jesus was there at the very start. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the A-Z, The beginning and the end".

That line from this morning's reading comes from almost the very end of the Bible's story, at the end of Revelation. And for those of us who know our Bibles a bit – we often tend to keep Revelation at arm's length, and don't really know it very well, because some of it is very difficult!

Lots of the best movies have very similar happy endings:

The nun marries the widower (sound of music), Elizabeth Bennett marries Mr Darcy (Pride and Prejudice), Robin Hood marries Maid Marion (Robin Hood), and the ogre marries the princess (Shrek)

And here we are at the end of the story of God in his world, and we have "The Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband."

But this is so very much more than the traditional winning formula end of story.

The love story of God and his people begins with creation, which is ruined by sin, and the relationship with God is spoiled too – the first people hide from God because they are ashamed of disobeying him, their descendents lie to God and disobey God and ignore God and curse God, and even the ones who try to live in relationship with God mess that up on a daily basis ... speaking for myself – I know I do anyway!

But the end of the story is God's new creation. This passage is not the same as the popular stories which say the world will be destroyed but the Christians will be rescued and removed from it to a safe place in Heaven ...this is life on earth as it should have always been, here there is no sin – no lies, no deceit, no selfishness, no sorrow or death or crying or pain.

This is a world of light and beauty and GOD IS PRESENT with his people, and that is the completion of the story. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the A-Z, The beginning and the end"

The book of Revelation was written by John, the disciple who was Jesus' best friend, at the very end of his life. It's a book in vivid picture language, and I think most preachers would be wary of preaching right through it, it is difficult stuff, and John wrote about this vision he had, in the language he knew, to people who didn't have the visual overloads we have in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*<sup>1</sup>Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. <sup>2</sup>I saw the Holy City, the new*

*Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. <sup>3</sup>And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. <sup>4</sup>He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

In our digitally enhanced high definition culture we can read that paragraph, and not be as moved by it as we should be.

With apologies to the others who went to Spring Harvest – who have heard or read this before – I'd like you to listen to a 21<sup>st</sup> meditation on this passage, written by a preacher in a church in Waterloo in London ... *Read from Spring Harvest Different Eyes Learning Guide p 85 & 86*

I was tempted to try and write a local version, but I wasn't sure I could do it anything like as well as that ... but what would a new Sherwood look like?

No more loneliness, no more poverty, no more drugs, no more graffiti, no more violence behind front doors.....?

And every time we meet together on a Sunday – and I hope for many of us every day when we pray on our own – we pray: Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And we are praying for that good ending....an ending which is also a new beginning. Jesus said – I am the Alpha and the Omega – the beginning and the end

But meanwhile we live in the waiting time, so what does that mean for us? Later this month the church celebrates Pentecost – the sending of the Holy Spirit on the disciples, and the gift of God's Holy Spirit is still on offer to his followers now, God gives us his Spirit for a purpose, and that purpose is to work to bring the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven, to follow Jesus and to live for God.

So ... if we know the end of the story – how can we work to bring it about? Christians see the church in different ways. Some maintain that despite recent changes in society we are still a Christian country, and the church is called to remind society of our Christian heritage and identity.

There is another view that we are now a secular society, no longer Christian, and the church needs to work out how we can live for God in a culture which neither respects nor recognises him – a bit like the Old Testament people when they were in exile in Babylon, or the early Christians in the Roman Empire where Caesar saw himself as Lord of all.

How do we as the Church play our part in bringing God's Kingdom? The church doesn't need to have a social strategy – because the church should BE the social strategy ... we should be a community that creates people willing to go against the culture and be shaped by a different story.

And by "Going against the culture I don't mean that we reject modern music and only listen to hymns or worship songs," or that we turn our backs on 21<sup>st</sup> century films and books I mean that we don't conform to the individual "my life and my rights" culture we live in, and that we love each other – as today's Gospel reading reminded us.

Jesus said "love one another. As I have loved you so you must love one another" and we all know we need plenty of practice at that – it doesn't come easy, and we need the empowering of the Holy Spirit.

This (BIBLE) is his story – this is our song – but perhaps we should think of our lives as our story – and see that our calling is to join in with his story and to play a part in bringing the Kingdom of God, and in the waiting time of trying to live our lives by Kingdom standards.

And that's why I asked Lu to copy the paper inside your service sheet – top 10 reasons to vote. I wouldn't dream of suggesting who you should vote for, and it *can* be hard to decide if you like one aspect of one party's policy and another aspect of their rival's.

But what we *shouldn't* be saying is "Well...I'm not really interested and it isn't really important – I am a citizen of heaven, I'm waiting for the New Jerusalem, and let them all drown in their moats because they are as bad as each other."

The Church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century became very inward looking. Rick Warren is an American Pastor, and 8 years ago he wrote "the Purpose Driven Life" – and it took the Christian world by storm. It was called a groundbreaking manifesto on the meaning of life and was described as a 40 day Spiritual journey – and many people both sides of the Atlantic read it as individuals and small groups and found it a helpful book.

Three years afterwards, Rick Warren told "Christianity" magazine that following a trip to Africa with his wife he realised that there was a gaping hole in his book because it had nothing about God's involvement with poor and marginalised people. He said "How did I miss that? I went to Bible College, 2 seminaries, and I got a doctorate – how did I miss God's compassion for the poor?"

I wonder - how much is today's secular society due to the fact that Christians have largely left politics to the politicians?

In 2001 the recognised Christian groups in the three main political parties came together to set up a joint initiative.- "Christians in Politics" Their website has clear links to the Christian Socialist Movement, the Conservative Christian fellowship and the Liberal Democrat Christian Forum. There is not a hint of implying one party is more holy than another – they are simply appealing to all Christians to be salt and light, and to see politics as service and mission, following Jesus who lived among us and got involved.

They believe the time is ripe for many Christians to move beyond single-issue campaigning to full involvement with the mainstream political parties, so that kingdom values should infuse every area of public policy, as the yeast works through the dough.

If God was calling one of us here to get involved in politics locally or nationally – how would we respond? I hope we wouldn't only pray if that person was representing the party we vote for. I hope we wouldn't feel disappointed if we didn't see them too often because their work was costly in its time commitment. I hope we would pray for them, and go on praying for them.

Meanwhile there are 3 pages in May's Philipian to encourage us to pray for this week's general election, and how to pray afterwards. Whoever gets in won't get it

right, they will all be human, and we expect a great deal from them.

The English word "Politics" comes from the Greek word "polis" which means city – and the word politics meant "the affairs of the city".

We don't live in a city, so in our community politics is the affairs of Sherwood, or of Tunbridge Wells. And we have people in our congregation who give themselves generously to politics at this level, through the community centre, or the schools, or in supporting individuals in a totally low profile but God honouring way.

Let's not forget to pray for them, and as we continue to ponder the questions Brian posed to us at the APCM last week – (and they are in Philippians if you missed it) – What do you think God might be calling you to do?

*Lord Jesus Christ, Alpha and Omega, A to Z, the beginning and the end, help us to glimpse the long view of your kingdom, to embrace our part in bringing it about, and to rejoice in the promise that one day you will make all things new, Amen*