



## En-Compassed in God: Alpha and Omega

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin  
The Feast of All Saints ~ November 1, 2009*

### Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

‘See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.’

And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ Also he said, ‘Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.’ Then he said to me, ‘It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Alpha and Omega: ‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth... the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals; ... they will be his people, and God himself will be with them; God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’ ‘See, I am making all things new.... I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.’ From the Book of Revelation, this is the vision of the final consummation of God, fulfillment of the words of the prophet Isaiah, for as we witness in the resurrection of Lazarus, with God all things are possible. The reach and embrace of God knows no bounds; I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. We are enveloped, en-compassed, embraced in God.

We begin (began) our celebration of the feast of All Saints at the dawn of the day with a new beginning, the baptism of the beautiful, infant, Torben. We (will) end our celebration at the eve of the day, with evensong, remembering before God and commending to God, the departed, the saints in light. At our baptismal beginning and at our burial ending, the light of Christ, symbolized in this Paschal Candle, burns brightly.

This morning/evening, I would like to consider with you: Is there a beginning and an ending? If so, then is there a time and space before we are with God, or after which we are beyond God? Is there any time or space when we are not en-compassed within this arc of Alpha and Omega? When does our life in Christ begin – if there is a beginning? And when might it end – if there is an ending? What I’m really wondering is: are there edges, parameters, for the body of Christ, or for the saints in light, or for the great host of heaven? Are some of us out? While some of us are in? Do we pass from out to in?

The French Jesuit philosopher, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, has stated: “We are not human beings having a

spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a human experience.” All we know now in this life is our human experience, from our beginning to our ending. But what of before? And of after?

My questions are prompted in part by a recent trip to Scotland and my reading of a little book on Celtic spirituality called *Listening for the Heartbeat of God*, by J. Philip Newell (Paulist Press, 1997). One of the earliest and best known Celts was Pelagius. In many respects, his perception and theology were at odds with the perception and theology of Augustine; thus Pelagius has gone down in history as a heretic and Augustine as a saint. Despite the teachings and the authority of the Church, there has remained for some 1500 years, in small communities on remote British Isles – and elsewhere, those who still believe and practice as did the earliest Christian Celts. I wish to touch on just a couple of aspects of Celtic theology and spirituality.

The traditional teaching of the church is – and here I paraphrase from the catechism – that ‘Holy Baptism is the means by which we are adopted as children of God, made members of Christ’s body, the Church, and inheritors of the Kingdom of God.’ (*The Book of Common Prayer*, p.858) Implicit even when not explicit in this understanding is that unless or until one is baptized, one is somehow outside; surely one not baptized is not yet a Christian. Yet there are those – both within the Christian flock and beyond – who wonder if God’s loving embrace is so clearly defined and proscribed. The traditional teaching, at least since Augustine, is that we are born in a fallen state and dependent upon baptism for reconciliation and life with God.

“The emphasis ... developed in the Celtic tradition was that in the birth of a child God is giving birth to [God’s] image on earth.” Pelagius “believed that the newborn, freshly come forth from God, contains the original, unsullied goodness of creation and humanity’s essential blessedness.” (p.14) “Thus the grace of salvation received through [Holy Baptism and the Sacraments of] the Church is given not to replace our nature but to release what is most fundamental in all people.” (p.18)

At the risk of oversimplifying, in this view, in his baptism, Torben does not pass from a fallen state prior to God’s grace into a raised state marked by grace; rather, in his baptism the pure potential of Torben’s created blessedness is released, set free; there is not and was not a time when Torben is or was outside, beyond, or before God’s grace.

What, then, at the eve of our life, as we pass from this life to the next? Here I believe the traditional teaching of the church and the Celtic teaching are consistent: that when we die we will be received by God in heaven, gathered and re-united with all who have gone before. What does this mean? Many who have lost someone we love to death, yet have felt and experienced that they are not gone, that they are not far from us. My cousin Chris died in a mountain climbing accident many years ago. At many times, on many occasions, Aunt Lisa and Uncle Desmond have felt sure that Chris is with them, alive in spirit. Aunt Lisa is not sure that she is Christian. I am not sure that she is not. One person whose family member recently died said she believed that in death her sibling was released, set free from the pain and struggles of her life. Another person believes that her mother, though dead, is often near by, watching, present.

I believe that even if we experience the departed as near to us while we are in *this* life, we will experience fuller union and communion with them when we, like them, have left behind our mortal selves. Perhaps there is truth to de Chardin’s proposal that “we are spiritual beings having a human experience.”

The questions I am raising may sound unorthodox or inconsistent with traditional teachings. Yet, I believe we all wonder about these things; we wonder about these things even when, perhaps especially when, we have committed ourselves wholly – as I have – to follow in the Way of Christ and the teaching of the church. I think it is good for us to consider the edges, the parameters, of our understanding, our experience and our belief. Exhilarating, even if frightening. Like looking over a rocky cliff at the frothing sea below, as long as we hold tightly to the hand of another, and don’t step too far out where the footing is loose, we’ll be okay.

Some of us are older, our bodies revealing a bit of wear and tear, and we find ourselves wondering more than we used to about endings and beginnings. Yet regardless our age or health, none of us know the hour of our death. So I urge you – even if you’re at the top of your game – to make those decisions and choose those things which we can control. Prepare your will, your medical directives, and living will; plan the celebration and ceremony for your burial. Seek forgiveness from those you have harmed; forgive those who have wronged you. Is this morbid? No. Scary perhaps. But also sacred. Death, like birth and life, is sacred. If you are unsure how to do any of these things, please speak with Claire or me; we can recommend anything from hymns to attorneys. Just as importantly, we will walk with you, hold hands, go to the edge of the cliff, look together and listen to one another.

Ultimately, it may be a fool’s errand to try to define or understand the parameters, to determine who is out or in, or when, or why. For me the crucial thing is belief that this present, physical, mortal experience – with all its richness and beauty, cruelty, pain, and love – is imbued and infused with a spiritual, sacred, eternal reality of the presence of God. With those saints who have gone before, and those yet to be born, we are en-compasped within the arc, from Alpha to Omega.

The Feast of All Saints is a time to draw near to what the Celts call “thin places – in which the spiritual world is very close to the natural” and where one may have “a keen mystical awareness of those who have gone before and of the host of heaven present among us on earth.” “What a wonderful world it is,” said 20th century Celtic mystic George MacLeod, “provided you believe in another world. Not over against this world, but interlaced with it.”(86)

I close with a prayer written by MacLeod, and read at his funeral. It is called “A Veil Thin as Gossamer.”

Be thou, triune God, in the midst of us as we give thanks for those who have gone from the sight of earthly eyes. They, in thy nearer presence, still worship with us in the mystery of the one family in heaven and on earth.

If it be thy holy will, tell them how much we love them, and how we miss them, and how we long for the day when we shall meet with them again.

Strengthen us to go on in loving service of all thy children. Thus shall we have communion with thee, and, in thee, with our beloved ones. Thus shall we come to know within ourselves that there is no death and that only a veil divides, thin as gossamer.

Amen.