

Did you notice the repetition of the word 'new' in our two readings? The Revelation reading spoke of everything being made 'new' including a 'new heaven', a 'new earth', and a 'new Jerusalem' whilst in the gospel reading Jesus gives his disciples a 'new commandment'. These two readings have been foundational to my new life in Christ which I would like to explore with you today.

By a new life in Christ, I mean the spiritual transformation that St Paul describes in Romans when a person accepts Jesus Christ as their Lord and saviour, becoming a "new creation" in Him.

A new life in Christ is something that we can come to early or late in our earthly life. I know some of you have experienced nothing other than a life in Christ. Others have experienced a once-for all event which catapulted you into this new life, but for me, this new life in Christ has come about gradually at different points in my life, each time bringing me to a deeper level of understanding, insight and connection with Christ culminating in my commitment to sharing God's love here at Holy Trinity.

An airline pilot friend of mine once said, it's not the destination that's important, but the journey. And my journey has certainly been one of ups and downs and really started with my previous wife's diagnosis of terminal cancer. I had been married to Dorcas for 14 years when she was told she had a maximum of 5 years to live. She amazed the medical team by surviving 12 years, and it was during this time that I frequently wrestled with her over the many questions which so many people I come across in my funeral ministry, do too.

If you've suffered a bereavement in your family or with friends, you will know the sort of questions I mean. What happens when I die? Is there life after death? Will I go to heaven? And so on. These are certainly the type of questions which were raised in the Bereavement Journey which Karen and her team recently led. Apologies, Karen, but in the session, I attended, I forgot to offer the quote from T.S. Eliot which I find so helpful. Eliot wrote: 'In my end is my beginning'.

I like that phrase because it reminds me that whilst Genesis helps us understand our beginning – where are we from? – Revelation helps us to understand our ultimate destination – where are we going? And the answer to both questions of course is the same: God. God who is the Alpha and the Omega. The God who walked with Adam in the garden of Eden, is the same God who will live with his people in the New Jerusalem. This gives me the confidence to say that I believe we are headed somewhere in particular – back to God where we will enjoy eternal communion with him.

We all know too well the reality of tears, pain, suffering, sadness and what most people consider to be the worst thing that can happen to us - death. Whether death comes early or late, suddenly or slowly, peacefully or amidst pain the Revelation reading shows that death is not the worst thing that can happen to those who have accepted a new life in Christ. The promise is quite clear that God will wipe away every tear from our eyes and there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. What's more, Revelation assures us that these words are trustworthy and true. So, God doesn't destroy things and simply replace them with new things. No, what he does is make all things new.

It took me a number of years to take this on board. Or to put it into a different context, think about how you look at paintings in a museum or art gallery. Do you walk briskly up to a picture and say, 'that's lovely' and walk on to the next? Or do you sit in front of it, contemplating what first your eyes, then your mind and finally your heart realises, that before you is the most wonderful and beautiful thing you have ever come across even if you don't fully understand all that the artist intended to be experienced?

That's how I feel about the Revelation reading. It was responsible for me assuming new perspectives, new attitudes, and new commitments in my new life in Christ. So much so that I chose the reading not only for Dorcas's funeral but also for my later marriage to Jane when we were, as the Collect Prayer

put it, joined in mutual love and companionship in holiness and commitment to each other. And as we saw it, joined in mutual love and commitment to God in our new identity as husband and wife. Which brings me neatly into the other 'new' aspect I want to share. Earlier in our service we said Amen to the Old Testament command to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

But now in our gospel reading Jesus makes that even more challenging for his disciples by adding a new element to this original command: to love one another in just the same way that he has loved them. That is a call to love with selflessness, humility, and forgiveness. By doing so they will be setting an example for the world to see.

Slowly the penny dropped for me. Whilst Jesus was speaking to his original disciples in that upper room, he was also speaking to me as I came to realise that such love should be the defining aspect of my Christian faith. What's more I began to understand that Jesus left that room and demonstrated the greatest possible love that a person can show by surrendering his life for others. On that Easter cross Jesus died out of love not only for his disciples of the time but for me too.

That is the agape love which we have spoken about before, the unconditional, self-sacrificing love which is not based on attraction, emotion, or reciprocity, but rather a deep, selfless commitment to the well-being of another. How else could Jesus pray for the forgiveness of those who were nailing him to that cross? How else could I be redeemed and have a new identity in Christ, and have the hope of eternal life?

And as a 21st century disciple of Jesus I am expected to love others in the way Jesus loved me, even though his love was perfect whilst mine is not - simply because I am human, and he is divine. Which is why each bereavement family I support challenges afresh my understanding of what I have shared with you today, that our tears will be wiped away and there will be no more death, or mourning, or suffering.

Fortunately, I am helped by remembering that Jesus wept over Jerusalem, at Lazarus's tomb and in the garden of Gethsemane which serves as a truly authenticating mark of Jesus's own humanity enabling me in my own flawed humanity to simply but consistently try my best to love others as Jesus loves me.

That is what learning to live loved is all about. In my earthly life I will endeavour to live out Jesus's command and love others as he loves me. And my death will be followed by an eternal life, made possible only because God makes everything new. Amen

Revd. Terry Ward-Hall, 13/7/25