

Famous Last Words

The Seventh Sunday of Easter, 2 June 2019

Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26

Let's try a little quiz. These are the last lines of famous books. English majors and librarians, unite. If you know the answer, call it out.

"So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." (*The Great Gatsby*, F.Scott Fitzgerald)

"God bless Us, Every One." (*A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens)

"He turned out the light and went into Jem's room. He would be there all night, and he would be there when Jem waked up in the morning." (*To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee)

"It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both." (*Charlotte's Web*, E.B. White)

"He found his supper waiting for him—and it was still hot." (*Where the Wild Things Are*, Maurice Sendak)

"But I don't think us feel old at all. And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt." (*The Color Purple*, Alice Walker)

"I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me, and I can't stand it. I been there before." (*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain)

"I'm so glad to be at home again!" (*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, L. Frank Baum)

These last lines are memorable and fitting because they reflect and summarize all that came before. Nick disillusioned with the glamorous life. Tiny Tim giving a blessing. Wilbur remembering his spider friend. The last line wraps up the whole story and brings it to a satisfying end.

So here's one more.

"Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen." (*The Bible*)

We just heard the very last words of the Bible. The Bible, of course, is a library, not a book. The 39 books of the Hebrew scriptures, the 27 books of the Christian scriptures, and the 14 or so writings of the Apocrypha were not written as a single whole. But they do tell a continuous story. They reflect God's journey with humanity over thousands of years.

They begin with stories Israel told about how the world came to be and Yahweh's delight in all creation. They talk about how human beings turned away from God's blessing, preferring to go our own way. Nevertheless, The Lord reached out to Abram and Sarai and promised to create a new nation out of an elderly nomadic couple, just as God created everything from nothing. The Lord intended for that nation to be a light to the world to reveal God's loving purposes to all. When the Israelites ended up as slaves in Egypt, The Lord set them free and gave them the law to reveal a new way of being in community with one another. The psalmists wrote over and over "Oh, how I love your law." They loved the idea of living in world where the poor were cared for and strangers were welcomed and debts were cancelled and everyone could be free.

But though they loved the law, they never quite mastered it. Then and now people majored on the minors, focusing on details about ritual purity rather than weightier issues of justice and freedom. The kings of Israel eventually became like the Pharaohs of Egypt, complete with big armies and slave labor. And because that way of life just does not work in God's world, their empire fell, like all the ones that came before and all the ones that followed since. We've been warned.

From exile in Babylon, the prophets knew God would give them a second chance, a chance to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream. They rebuilt Jerusalem but soon fell into their old ways. Again, they were taken over by other empires. Again, greed was rampant. Again, people were suffering in God's beautiful, abundant, glorious world.

So, in the midst of that hard time, an angel told Mary she would bring God's child into the world. Jesus grew up and proclaimed the good news of God's kingdom. It was his way of describing God's plan for the world, where the poor are blessed and hungry people are filled and enemies are loved. Some people followed him and loved him. But some thought he had gone too far, and others thought he did not go far enough. His opponents all got together and put him to death.

And on the third day, God raised Jesus from death to demonstrate the truth of what he had to say and to make the whole creation new. Forty days later he ascended. We celebrated Ascension Day on Thursday. The disciples watched as he disappeared, promising to send the Holy Spirit to be their advocate and guide.

In the power of that Spirit, the early followers of Jesus got busy and organized the church. The church is the presence of Jesus still in this world – healing and feeding and embracing and proclaiming the good news. And just like Jesus, the body of the church is sometimes beaten up and left for dead. It happened to Jesus, so we should not be surprised when it happens to us, when people ignore us or oppose us or disagree with us. John, the author of Revelation, was actually put in prison. From prison he saw a vision of God's kingdom finally triumphing over evil and reigning for ever and ever and ever.

From his prison cell on Patmos, John wrote a letter to his church, the letter we just read, which we call Revelation. His final words in the letter, and the final words of the Bible, are these: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen."

These final words sum up all that came before. This is the message of the scriptures. God will never give up on this broken world. God will keep working to heal and save. Jesus our Lord is the sign and seal of God's grace and favor towards us all.

Come, Lord Jesus! Help us live your reign in a world that does not live up to God's vision.

Come, Lord Jesus! Work through us to feed the hungry in body and spirit.

Come, Lord Jesus! Make us one, that the world may know you have loved them with the same love that binds the Holy Trinity together.

Come, Lord Jesus! Do not leave us comfortless, but send your Holy Spirit to strengthen us.

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen.

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Grace Burton-Edwards
St. Thomas Episcopal Church
Columbus, GA 31906
StThomasColumbus.org

Later in the service

It was fitting to hear the end of the Bible today because we are celebrating all of our church teachers. These are people who introduce the scriptures to our younger members and who unpack it with our older ones.

O God, by your Holy Spirit you give to some the word of wisdom, to others the word of knowledge, and to others the word of faith: We praise your Name for the gifts of grace manifested in your servant N., and we pray that your Church may never be destitute of such gifts; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, forever and ever. Amen.