

Week 9: The Final Victory of God

In the Muir household, one of the topics on which we occasionally have good-natured banter is whether the arts or sport is superior. It will come as no great surprise to you that I mostly think that sport has the edge; but in thinking about tonight's topic, I have come to see an area where I might cede some ground to the arts.

As human beings, God's creatures, we have an in-built curiosity for finding out what happens in the end. For a lot of sports, I find that you can come down and catch the last five minutes of a match, see the result, perhaps see a few highlights, and then be satisfied that you saw what happened. The result is the most important thing. With the arts, however, it is perhaps different. Some people somewhat incomprehensibly turn to the end of a novel to see what happens, but it means almost nothing without the context of what comes before. Highlights of artistic performances do not, I feel, capture the spirit of the whole piece. While some more contemporary art forms are not interested in linearity, there is often a finale, a climax, an ending which keeps the audience waiting, but the whole piece matters.

I think what Michael Lloyd rather delightfully terms as "the final victory of God" is closer to an artistic ending – where a climax is reached but what goes before is important – than a more sporting ending, where a game, for sure, develops but all that really matters is the result.

Nevertheless, we want to know what happens in the end, or at least in the future. Virtually all civilisations have had prophets and soothsayers whose function has been to "divine" the future. And a lot of them have turned out to be wrong.

So much of the Apostles' Creed is rooted in the past, but there is a small section which pertains to the future. Presently, the ascended Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father; but it goes on to say: "He shall come from there (or again) to judge the living and the dead". In many senses, that's all that matters – and all we have. The Scriptures give very little by way of information regarding when Jesus Christ will return. We are told twice in neighbouring parables in Matthew 24 and Matthew 25 that the day and the hour of heaven and earth passing away, and Christ returning are unknown. Elsewhere, in 1 Thessalonians 5:2 and 2 Peter 3:10, the day of the Lord is described as a "thief in the night". Although the day is unknown, we ought to be alert.

Nevertheless, based on the Scriptures and centuries of tradition and reason, it is right to try and picture what this final victory of God might look like. That Christ will come again is part of the hope that the church is called to proclaim to the world.

Before we embark on this journey with the help of some of Lloyd's points, I wanted to mention two key terms that are often used of this topic and define them a little.

Firstly, eschatology: a term which Lloyd understandably resists (and I think rightly: final victory of God captures the idea much better!), although he uses it in the questions. The primary meaning of *eschatos* in Greek is "last"; so, in broad terms, eschatology is the study of what happens at the last. Although it is more helpful to think about the "end" as being the goal

(another Greek word: *telos*), so more to do with fruition and fulfilment, maybe even consummation, than finale.

Secondly, apocalypse. I can think of a few quite grungy rock songs with heavy beats that evoke the apocalypse, as something dark. The primary meaning of apocalypse though is revelation. The final book of the Bible, Revelation, is also known more literally as the *Apocalypse of John*. Revelation is not a bad thing; it is something we need and long for.

Hopefully, we are now well-placed to think about some of the facets of the final victory of God, which I group into four main areas.

Firstly, the final victory of God has a temporal aspect: it is situated in time. We have seen throughout Café Theology that God has not given up on creation, even though it went wrong. Christ became flesh at an appointed time in history; and the Spirit has remained with us ever since he ascended to the Father. Although the Triune God is outside of the space-time continuum, He is still involved in the real and material world, which we believe, progresses in linear fashion. Consequently, it makes sense that Christ should return in time, although we know not precisely when. This is a future event, but the victory is assured even now. Lloyd is very right in saying: “the victory of the Cross was complete – but it has yet to be fully implemented”. We live in this eschatological tension: we have been saved by the power of the cross, we are presently being saved and refined (more to come on this), and one day we shall be saved – although not in the Gnostic sense where we escape from an imperfect world not created by God Himself; but in a world, which was created by God, which has been transformed. All of this is situated in time; His story is our story.

Secondly, the final victory of God will involve judgement. “He will come again to *judge* the living and the dead” is perhaps the part of the creed which the world and seekers find most difficult. Thankfully, the judging is up to God and not to us, but we may have developed some false images of what the final judgement might look like – perhaps no thanks to the arts! Scripture is clear, however, that there will be a separation between good and evil. The goodness of God is non-negotiable in Christian theology, and consequently, the final victory must be good; there is no room for evil. Some of Jesus’ parables, for example: the parable of the net in Matthew 13:47-50, show the separation between good and bad (here, in terms of fish) to talk about the events of the end (or culmination) of the age.

This separation between good and evil leads to the judgement and destruction of evil. Lloyd helpfully sets out some options that God has in dealing with evil: leaving things as they are, forcing people to be good against their will, or destroying creation. None of these, however, is satisfactory so the middle and right course is to judge: to preserve the good and to purge the bad. Judgement is therefore something necessary and, on many levels, positive. Its result is the new heaven and new earth in which justice dwells of 2 Peter 3:13.

You might have felt that Lloyd is somewhat silent (and wisely so!) on the issue of who – or how many – will be saved. Again, he quotes 2 Peter 3, this time verse 9 which talks about God’s patience: “not wanting anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance”. God’s character is all about making room for loving relationship, even including us; we saw this last week with the Trinity and I think we see this also in this verse. The verb used in the phrase

“come to repentance” (*choreo*) has to do with making room. I don’t think we mentioned this term last week but one common term to describe the harmonious relationship within the Trinity is *perichoresis*, which is linked to the term *choreo* used in 2 Peter 3 verse 9. Yet, God does not force himself on anyone; He makes room, but some simply choose not to be in relationship with Him. While judgement is inherently good, I believe we have to take seriously the “weeping and gnashing of teeth” that comes seemingly from rejecting God, and to help steer others away from this. Perhaps that might be something to unpack in groups; this is my attempt to approach the slight “elephant in the room” sensitively!

Thirdly, the final victory of God will involve restoration and renewal. In one of Peter’s early gospel proclamations recorded in Acts 3:21, he says this about Jesus:

“Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to *restore* everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.”

This restoration and drawing together of all things is vital in understanding the final victory of God. Paul’s letters Ephesians and Colossians talk a great deal about the mystery of Christ being revealed, which will come into fulfilment at the culmination of time. There will be all sorts of healing: bodily healing, healing between nations and different cultures, since God’s presence brings holiness. This is what the often-used Greek term for the second coming, *parousia*, literally and ultimately means.

Further, Lloyd draws a helpful link between the incarnation and Christ’s coming again:

“At the Incarnation, Christ gathered all things earthly and heavenly into one; at His coming again, He will open them up to one another, that they may be as permeable to one another as are the Persons of the Godhead.”

The final victory of God will result in our restored relationship and place within the Trinity. Our relatedness to God will be renewed. Paul famously writes in 1 Corinthians 13:12: “For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face-to-face.” We can still enjoy some vision of God in this life; but it is far from the renewed 20-20 sight of heaven. As well as the renewal of our relatedness with God, our relatedness to others will also be healed. This is also a huge source of relief and joy. Since at the final victory of God, we shall be changed, renewed so that we are our true selves, stripped of all that isn’t of God. We shall, therefore, enjoy no more falling out and disagreements with one another. Forgiveness will no longer be necessary in the way generous doses of it are required in the present.

This leads onto the final helpful point of the chapter: fourthly, the final victory of God should prompt us to holiness now; indeed, this sanctification (our being made holy) is a key part of this present life in preparation for eternity. The writers of the New Testament thought that Christ would return within a generation or so, so often talked about this future hope, but as Lloyd points out, they often did so within the context of holiness. So, for example, when Paul talks about singleness in 1 Corinthians 7, his guidance that a person should stay as they are is partly influenced by more eschatological or apocalyptic motivations: he talks about “the present/impending crisis (or necessity)” of verse 26.

Elsewhere, in Romans 13:11-13, Paul writes that:

“For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armour of light; let us live honourably as in the day...”

So, when we think about the final victory of God, we can remember that our sanctification in this life matters. It involves a partnership and relationship between us and God; we can trust that if we aim for holiness, God will complete the process for us. I know there are parts of my life which need God’s transforming and perfecting; some days, I even feel like I am becoming less saintly; but if we are trusting God and looking forward to his final victory, then we can trust that we are going forwards, even if we can’t see it. One day we shall know and be known in full. That day will be when Christ returns and completes his final victory.