

**Who are we?**

*Psalm 132; Revelation 1:4b-8*

Beginnings and endings are part of life: the births and deaths of people, of relationships, of projects, of buildings. They shape our lives in many different ways. They can bring risk and vulnerability; they can bring good health or ill health. They can bring despair, and they can bring hope.

Today we mark the end of the Church's liturgical year. It is sometimes described as Christ the King Sunday, when we think about what it means to know Jesus as King in our lives, from beginning to end. It might make us wonder about the beginnings and endings that we have experienced or witnessed in these past twelve months. How have we been aware of God, who is both Alpha and Omega, throughout the year? It might make us wonder about what the power of God and the meaning of God affects our lives and how we live them. How we answer questions like these will tell us, and anyone who cares to pay attention, what we believe, how we believe, and the person in Whom we believe.

The Book of Revelation, which contains many different styles of writing, including letters, was probably written by John, one of the youngest of Jesus' disciples. He was exiled to the island of Patmos. It was written to young Christian communities in different parts of the Roman Empire, fearful for their lives. These opening words, spoken in a time of uncertainty, when there was state terrorism and persecution, and not knowing who you could trust or who would betray you to death, speak of a God in Jesus Who is here and now, because He spans time from beginning to end, from Alpha to Omega.

When the horrors of Paris, and Beirut, and Baghdad, and Mali fill the news, and we despair, again, for the future of our world, and we remember how many other tragedies we have forgotten, this passage from Revelation, telling us of the God in Jesus Who spans time and is with us always, steadies us. In life and in death, we belong to God.

Which is why it is important to talk about beginnings and endings, about Alpha and Omega. Here is a chance, like Hogmanay without the hangover, to reflect on what this year has been for you. Here is the chance, before we enter into Advent, that time of waiting and further reflection before Christmas, to look at who we are, and Who we believe in, and to think for ourselves what makes us, 'us'.

The former Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, has said, "Religion survives because it answers three questions that every reflective person must ask. Who am I? Why am I here? How then shall I live?" I like that a lot.

In a time of beginnings and endings – it is not unimportant to work out who we are and what we become. It is important to ask ourselves, before we start looking at others, how we are living, what our standards and practice is. Nor is it unimportant for us as people of faith to work out Who and what Jesus is for us. Our Christian faith is about reflection and it is about practice.

There are many lenses through which we can look at our lives. There are many mirrors in which we can see what our reflection looks like. A time of tragedy is a particularly brutal time to look at ourselves and others. What happened in Paris, and Beirut, and Mali in recent days has shown images of our world that are hard to take. That such brutality could be perpetrated by one child of God against another is hard to take. It is hard to be philosophical, understanding, willing to negotiate when confronted with the jagged edge of terrorism. When our instincts cry out for revenge, they drown out everything else.

And yet, some of the responses that have come in the light of these events are no less challenging. A candidate for the American presidency has called for a register to be drawn up of all American Muslims. Not dissimilar to Hitler and the Nazis enacting the same law in the Germany of the 1930s. And yes, the suggestion *is* as bad as that. The call for air-strikes against Isis targets in Syria sounds justifiable, until the sorry recent history of similar attacks in Afghanistan and Iraq should teach the leaders of the world that responding to violence with

violence rarely produces an answer. Closing borders to Syrian refugees because they may include those who would intend us harm may scarcely takes into account the devastation that the overwhelming majority of refugees are fleeing. Imagine if Jesus limited His ministry based upon the conditions of comfort and security. And perhaps we ought to remember that in His infancy, Jesus too was a refugee.

None of this is easy, and I know politicians, diplomats, security chiefs and others wrestle not only with the practical but with the moral implications of their actions. Knee-jerk, however, is not one. We are better than that. As a society, and as a Church, we define and redefine lines that must not be crossed, and that is a complex and ever-shifting reality. Humans created terrorism, so perhaps we should stop praying to God for a solution.

Above it all, and in it all, and after it all, God is still at work. The beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega, and in the difficult, sometimes dark in-between, God is still at work.

God is also still speaking. Life evolves, perspective evolves, we evolve. Why shouldn't our faith? If God is still speaking, are we still listening? Do we still hear God's call for peace with justice; mercy with kindness; honesty with compassion?

In the hotel in Mali, and in the streets of Paris and Beirut and Baghdad, God is still at work through God's people. The Muslim and the Jew and the Christian and the Hindu and the Sikh and all those who are not sure what they are if they are anything at all. Sandwiched between the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega, God's people are still at work. Someone once said, "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.'"<sup>1</sup> After the events of Paris, the French government announced that it would welcome a further 30,000 Syrian refugees over the next two years.

Beginnings and endings; Alpha and Omega. And above it all, Christ the King: the King of Peace; the King of Love. Looking to see what His people, His friends, His helpers are doing in

His Name to reflect what His message of peace and hope and forgiveness and love is all about. Who are we? That's who we are. In the crisis – the helpers. In the hunger – the givers. In the fear – the hope. In the darkness – the light.

Mother Teresa once said, "At the end of our lives we will not be judged by how many diplomas we have received, how much money we have made, how many great things we have done. We will be judged by, 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was naked and you clothed me; I was hungry and you took me in.'"

Who are we? That's who we are. Who are we? We are Christians, following in the footsteps of Christ the servant king. Who are we? We are the people between the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. We are the people of the here and now doing the best we can, to ensure that our world, even the little bit of it that we inhabit, is better, brighter, happier, safer, more welcoming, more forgiving, more generous, more loving. A world of hope; a world of light; a world of promise; a world of peace. It will not always be that all of the time. But that is what we work towards, in the little ways and the big ways. It is who we are because of what we are. Christians.

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Fred Rogers