

Hope

January, 2000, during a luncheon in his honor, Dr. Billy Graham told the following story: "I'm reminded today of Albert Einstein, the great physicist who this month has been honored by Time magazine as the Man of the Century. Einstein was once traveling from Princeton on a train when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of each passenger. When he came to Einstein, Einstein reached in his vest pocket. He couldn't find his ticket, so he reached in his other pocket. It wasn't there, so he looked in his briefcase but couldn't find it. Then he looked in the seat by him. He couldn't find it. The conductor said, 'Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it.' Einstein nodded appreciatively. The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. As he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and saw the great physicist down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket. The conductor rushed back and said, 'Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry. I know who you are. No problem. You don't need a ticket. I'm sure you bought one.' Einstein looked at him and said, 'Young man, I too know who I am. What I don't know is where I'm going.'"

Where are we going; what is to become of us? It is a question of universal and constant interest to us, is it not? In November of 2006, one of the television networks ran a special program on something that I think was entitled "The End of the World", or words to that effect. It detailed a supposed scientific and statistical study of the ten most likely apocalyptic events that would effectively generate the end of the world, or at least life as we know it on earth. I don't remember all of them, but they were big ticket items; things like a meteor hitting the earth, or being sucked into a black hole, or global thermonuclear war, or even (and interestingly the highest statistical probability of occurrence) the meltdown of the ice caps due to global warming and its impact on the climate and land mass of earth. It was an intriguing, if morbid, look at a subject that most of us would choose to ignore. A review of the ratings on the show might have provided an interesting statistical reality check. Then again, it might well have provided a good sanity check on the degree of optimism and hope that currently exists in this country. Why? Because it is difficult to see at times how any sane person living in this world can have any hope for a desirable outcome for themselves or any of their progeny that follow them. If humans are not pursuing their well known proclivity to destroy each other, then events within the universe over which humans exercise no control are said to be lining up against this frail planet. Witness the well-known quote from Bertrand Russell in A Free Man's Worship summing up the situation we face: "All the labor of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system--the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins."

Not a pretty picture, but most people who fancy themselves to be rational realists of the enlightened generation would have no problem embracing such a picture. Yet for us who believe in the hereafter, this attitude and conclusion make no sense. We know where we are going, we believe that the end of this life is not the end of all things, don't we? Let me ask again; "don't we?" I'm not going to pin any of you down to a direct response to my question, but I will hazard the opinion that many if not all of us harbor questions about both the hereafter, and what our role will be in it. The Propers for today address just such a situation, and provide answers to address such a question.

Let's start with the Gospel reading, coming from the 21st Chapter of the Gospel of St. Luke: "[And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth; for the powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.](#)" I don't think you can find a much firmer prognostication about the manner in which the second coming of Christ will occur. It is not difficult to meld this viewpoint with my earlier comments on the program about how the world will end. The second coming of Christ will be a foundation / earth shaking event that will conclude in the destruction of the

earth as we know it. In this sense, Bertrand Russell is correct. All the things of which humans are so proud will be gone in an instant; lost in the vast magnitude of universe of immeasurable size. Just as we can take nothing with us when we die, the earth will retain nothing when it dies.

However, for us as Christians, it will not be the end of all things. The Cross is the source of our hope. We believe that Christ Jesus came to earth in a human as well as divine form, sacrificed himself to the Father as propitiation for the sins of all humans, rose again from the dead to reign in heaven on the right hand of the Father, will come again in glory and majesty to judge both the living and the dead, and at the last day will restore sanctified souls to resurrected bodies that will live with the Father through all eternity.

Someone might ask “where do you get that information?” And my response would be “read the Bible!” As the first lines of the Epistle reading from St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, chapter 15, verse 4 says: “[Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.](#)” As the text of the Epistle reading says, everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope of salvation. Christianity is a teaching religion, and the teaching text is the Bible. The Bible teaches us what God has chosen to reveal to us of himself, and the path he has laid out for achieving salvation.

So someone might say “what makes the Bible credible as a proof statement of God’s existence and promise of resurrection for all believers?” My response would be as follows:

1. The Bible is from God. Unlike books written by other humans, the Scriptures are from God; they have the authority and power of God within them. Granted, they were recorded by humans, but the recordings were of the prophecies and fulfillments as directed and performed in ancient times by God, and recorded by men as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. Holy Scripture did not have its origin in the will of man, but in the will of God. Scripture is inspired by God. Further, God has promised to bless scripture to the ends for which it was written ([Isa. 55: 10-11](#) “[For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that which goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.](#)”
2. Everything that is in the Bible is for our good, and is profitable for our learning; nothing is contained within the Bible that has no value. Many people are prone to pick and choose what they believe in the Bible, or to attribute passages that they don’t agree with to the authorship of humans rather than God, and therefore not necessary as beliefs they must subscribe to. This is not the Bible’s teaching, nor is it historic Christianity. The Bible teaches that everything in it is the true Word of God, and that it is binding upon all humans. We may not understand everything in the Bible, and we may not want to follow everything we do understand, but if we are to be true Christians, led by the Holy Spirit, then we must conform our thoughts and actions to everything we find in God’s Holy Word.

The role of Holy Scripture in developing the hope that sustains Christians is beautifully summed up in the Collect for today: “Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen”

If we will spend time reading, learning, and inwardly digesting Holy Scripture, we will come to adopt and hold that faith and hope that will sustain us through the ups and downs of life. That hope is the key to enduring what we face. As Saint Francis of Sales (1567-1622) put it, “Do not look forward to the changes and chances of this life in fear; rather look to them with full hope that, as they arise, God, whose you are, will deliver you out of them. He is your Keeper. He has kept you hitherto. Hold fast to his dear hand, and he will lead you safely through all things; and, when you cannot stand, he will bear you in his

arms. Do not look forward (with despair) to what may happen tomorrow. Our Father will either shield you from suffering, or he will give you strength to bear it.”

Hope is what gives us patience and endurance to deal with our lot in life. Let me finish with a somewhat whimsical poem that makes this point:

Two frogs fell into a deep cream bowl,
One was an optimistic soul
But the other took the gloomy view,
"I shall drown he cried, "and so will you."
So with a last despairing cry,
He closed his eyes and said, "Good-bye."
But the other frog, with a merry grin,
Said, "I can't get out, but I won't give in!
I'll swim around till my strength is spent.
For having tried, I'll die content."
Bravely he swam until it would seem
His struggles began to churn the cream.
On the top of the butter at last he stopped
And out of the bowl he happily hopped.
What is the moral? It's easily found.
If you can't get out--keep swimming around!

My friends, hope is what keeps us swimming around. May this season of new life and new beginnings be also the renewal of a sound and steadfast hope in the resurrection, based on reading, learning, and inwardly digesting God's Holy Word. *Amen.*