

## THE SENSE OF AN ENDING

Sung Eucharist

Sunday After Ascension

St. Michael, Cornhill

Sunday, May 17th 2015

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Evelyn Waugh is best known either for his novels spiced with black humour or indeed for the gilded world of *Brideshead Revisited*. His greatest novel, however, is almost certainly *A Handful of Dust*, published in 1934. The title is taken from T.S.Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* where Eliot's lines simply say: 'I will show you fear in a handful of dust'. But, it is the conclusion of the novel which is most compelling of all. Throughout the story there is Waugh's normal lacing with humour, but the conclusion sees the hero, Tony Last deep in the jungle in the lost hinterland of what was then British Guiana.

This location picks up a gruelling journey that Waugh himself made and wrote up in a travel book. Tony Last, his hero, survives every form of privation – bodily wounds, a terrible fever and severe injuries. He's finally given sanctuary in the home of a man living in the heart of this lost jungle. The man is both mad and evil. He gets Tony to read novel after novel by Charles Dickens (whose novels incidentally Waugh hated). When he's finished reading them aloud then they simply start again. Tony talks to his host of moving on, but this obsessive host makes it clear that Tony either ends his days there - perpetually reading Dickens, or he dies in an attempt to escape. It is a most chilling ending.

Just like the beginnings of stories, with famous examples from L.P.Hartley to Jane Austen and even to Dickens himself, so too endings are crucial. Indeed the great English literary critic, Frank Kermode even wrote a book titled simply, *The Sense of An Ending*. Now, we in the Christian tradition are now in the season of endings. Jesus has suffered, he has died and he has been raised. But each of the four gospels deals with these various endings in greatly contrasting ways.

So Mark, whose gospel we believe to be the earliest, leaves us simply with *the empty tomb*. The women are greeted by a man who says Jesus is risen. They flee in great terror and 'say nothing to anyone' for they were afraid. Matthew, perhaps the next to be written, has Jesus say farewell to the disciples on the top of a mountain, magisterially encouraging to friends to 'go and make disciples of all nations', and finally ending by saying, 'lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.'

John's gospel - a very different narrative in so many ways -has Jesus eating fish for breakfast by the Sea of Galilee. John's aim is to make it clear that this risen Jesus is the same man the disciples have known, with just as much human solidity as ever. He's not some magical phantom-like figure. But it's *Luke's* pattern that we're treated to these days before Pentecost, and indeed even at Pentecost itself.

Luke faces an entirely different challenge from the other writers, since he goes on to write a second volume – what we call *The Acts of the Apostles*. So this means that Jesus cannot simply be left in suspension, so to speak, as with Mark and Matthew. Nor indeed will a cosy fish brunch down by the lake do. The story has to continue, and yet Luke and his readers know that Jesus is no longer with them in the bodily form they once knew. So what has happened?

Well, you'll all know the answer. Luke treats us to two quite separate accounts in an attempt to explain this transition from the bodily encounters with the risen Jesus, to the existential or experiential encounters with people like Paul and his community. Both of Luke's accounts have Jesus ascending, being drawn back to the Father only to come again in the person of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and indeed, on myriad occasions thereafter to countless souls down the ages.

Of course, Luke's pattern has led to lots of rather crude pictures of Jesus' 'exaltation'. If you visit the Church of the Ascension, on the Mount of Olives, in Jerusalem you'll see just one footprint in the concrete where Jesus had 'lift-off' as the astronauts say. At Walsingham, in this country, in one chapel there's a mural of Jesus but only from the waist down as he passes up through the ceiling from the divine bargain basement to penthouse and beyond.

As with all such heavenly pictures, images and divine occurrences, it's always best to avoid crude descriptions. You'll have noticed, I'm sure, that none of the evangelists attempts to describe the Resurrection as it happened. Unfortunately, Luke's dramatic images of ascension have all too often produced slightly loony responses. You even see diagrams of Jesus descending at his birth, remaining on terra firma for thirty three years and then ascending back to the Father. It's a sort of graph of divine activity!

But the aim of Luke's two images – and Luke at no point suggests he *himself* was there – Luke's aim is to show how through the Resurrection Jesus is exalted in such a way that the power of God's love is now available in a dramatically new way. It's as if there's a breakthrough to a more open heaven. Such openness comes through what we call *grace*. God's grace is universally available and anything we achieve is only through God's grace as made known in Jesus. That's spelt out in our epistle and gospel readings today.

Now this is an *ending* really worth celebrating. Instead of Waugh's victim in eternal thrall and captivity to evil, now everyone of us is free to open our hearts to God's overflowing grace and love. Next week that's just what we celebrate at Pentecost and in present realities in Baptism and Confirmation.

Amen.

### Readings

Acts. 1. 15-17

I. John. 5. 9-13.

John. 17. 6-19.