

Easter 6 am 2004

You must know as well as I do how important to any story its ending is: For one of the things endings do is bring everything together, and resolve any unanswered questions – sometimes with a twist. So, for example, in a detective thriller it is usually right at the end that you find out who has done the murder. If the ending is a good one - if it's in the hands of a P.D. James or a Peter Ackroyd - then usually there is something of an initial surprise, followed by a satisfied realisation of how it does all fit together and make sense.

However as well as resolving things, the function of an ending is sometimes to leave the story open, so that we still have things to consider and work through - questions, paradoxes to ponder. A really good story should start something in us, so that, in one sense, we ourselves become one of its characters, albeit by extension. A good example of this is a book I read a while ago called *Sophie's World* by Jostein Gaarder. In essence it is a hitch-hikers guide to the history of western philosophy (pretty well in its entirety, actually!), presented as the intriguing adventure story of a girl called Sophie. Gaarder is very clever because the way he ends the plot leaves you puzzling over one particularly recent issue in philosophy - the possibility of multiple realities; for the characters within the world of the book, whom we start out believing to be "real" people in the narrative, turn out to be characters themselves within another book (a bit like a dream within a dream), and the two worlds seem miraculously to be able to interact with each other. So as you finish the last page of *Sophie's World*, the question you end up asking yourself is; "Mightn't we ourselves be characters in somebody else's book?" If that sounds confusing, I suggest you read *Sophie's World*! But I hope you see what I am trying to say in general about open-ended stories.

[Well], from a Christian perspective it seems to me that the story of Jesus' life is, par excellence, the open-ended story. Every event in his life, everything he says, every encounter and conversation, raises questions that we know we must take seriously; so seriously in fact that we are prepared to be changed personally by them. As we begin to find answers to the questions Jesus' life puts before us, what happens is that we actually become a part of the plot ourselves - we become internal to it, so to speak. Though the words of the Gospels come to an end at their last verses, the story itself actually continues, through the events of our lives as we try our best to live them out in the same faithfulness to God. The ending of St John's Gospel is, I think, particularly illuminating in this regard. St John's last sentence is this; "But there are many other things that Jesus did; if

everyone of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." Couldn't it be that that is a reference to the life and work of Jesus in every believer through the ages, up to and including you and me now? In a sense our part in the story has already been written in to it. John has left room for us as well.

On Thursday we will be celebrating Ascension Day – one of the most important days in the Christian year – and I believe a fruitful way of understanding the Ascension might be to think of it as that moment of transition when the words of the story on the page have stopped, but the narrative continues, through those - through us - who are living out its implications.

The Gospel this morning contains some of Jesus' own reflections on how we are to experience our life within his story, beyond the moment when he has physically left us. Jesus is getting ready to leave his disciples and return to the Father, and he is explaining important things to them. Above all, he says, we must be characterized by one quality – our obedience to him: “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.” To put it most simply, being obedient - loving him - is the experience of his life in us now; the experience of being a part of his story. Sounds simple, but as we know well, in reality this is far from being undemanding. I guess every single sermon you will hear will be in one way or another concerned with being obedient to Christ. No easy option here.

But the matter does not stop at this point, for there is some good news as well, and immediately after throwing down the gauntlet, so to speak, Jesus explains the good news to his friends. The counterpart of our obedience to him, our will to faithfulness, is his initiative towards us: and this is in the form of a gift, from the Father, of one called the Paraclete or Comforter or Advocate: the Holy Spirit, who will be with us always and whom is the Spirit of Truth. It is the presence of the Paraclete (I am going to use that word instead of the NEB's "Advocate") that is the encouraging and empowering guarantee of the reality of Christ's continuing life in ours, and ours in his.

The Paraclete is mentioned five times in St John's Gospel and in each instance he is depicted as supporting and helping the disciples: He will abide with the disciples and rest in them; he will teach the disciples everything; he will guide the disciples along the way of all truth; he will take what belongs to Jesus in order to declare it to the disciples; he will glorify and bear witness to Jesus; he will remind the disciples of all that Jesus told them. The Holy Spirit as Paraclete is to be the personal presence of Jesus with us whilst Jesus is

with the Father. In a few weeks time, at Pentecost, we will be thinking further about what the Holy Spirit means to us.

Well, to finish and to sum-up. My suggestion has been that as we prepare for Jesus' departure from us, a helpful model to have in mind is the open-ended story in which we become members of the cast and have a real influence over its outcome. The experience of our living in the open-endedness, when Jesus is with us even though he has physically gone from us, has been explained to us by Jesus himself. It is about both our obedience, and his presence to us in the experience of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete. This is great news; we are not to be as orphans without him. But we do, finally, need to be aware that this must have a related effect on the way we belong to the world around us. "In a while the world will no longer see me, though you will see me.." he says. To belong to his story means we have, in some way, to give up a place in the plot of the world's story.