Sunday, September 21, 1975
THE FUTURE ISN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE!
I Corinthians 13:8-13; Revelation 21:1-5

"For now, we see in a mirror dimly," wrote St. Paul to the church at Corinth. Or as the King James version of the Bible puts it, "We see through a glass darkly."

Paul is saying that there are so many changes that are taking place that it's difficult to know what the future holds. And he gives some examples — prophecies change and disappear and are often wrong. In fact, all of the circumstances of life are difficult to predict and understand. We think things are going to continue one way, but something happens, and the direction totally changes. So, Paul talks about the three things we can count on, the things that will last — faith, hope and love.

What is our condition today? We too, see through a glass darkly, although many people do not think so. The future is not what it used to be!

1. First note that not very long ago, science and technol-ogy were commonly regarded as our saviors. Soon, many predicted our technology would have most of our problems solved. And some still believe that if the so-called underdeveloped countries get enough of western technology, their problems will be solved.

In 1968, Herman Kahn of the Hudson Institute foresaw that the extensive use of computerized robots to help with the housework and other chores would be "very likely" by the year 2000. He called it an even bet that true artificial intelligence would be developed by then.

Arthur C. Clarke's book — and the movie derived from it, in the late sixties — "2001, A Space Odyssey, gave us an unforgettable hero and villain, Hal the Computer, who not only understood and spoke perfect idiomatic English but also could pick up subtle nuances of intonation.

Without much thought on the matter, we came to accept computers and other technological devices as superhuman and as solving most of our problems. In television cartoons and science-fiction thrillers, the computer, the robot and the cyborg (a combination of living organism and. machine) took on the role of the all-knowing, all-powerful god of our age. The popularization of the human-machine linkup reached a new low in the television series, "The Six-Million Dollar 11an," in which a badly injured astronaut has been rebuilt as part man, part computerized machinery.

But the future isn't what it used to be. It now appears that some of our assessments and predictions were wrong. Computers can indeed perform certain feats of computation and retrieval that seem to be beyond normal human mental powers. We are finding out, however, that even the largest most advanced computer cannot be made to understand sen-tences which a four-year-old child can comprehend without hesitation. And so simple a trick as riding a bicycle without using the hands has thus far resisted duplication by sophisticated space-age technology. A NASA sponsored bicycle-balancing robot recently failed to do what any 12-year-old would gladly demonstrate.

Science and technology and the gadgets we have created, although often helpful, are no longer seen as the saviors. In fact, by some they are seen as profoundly dangerous. The future isn't what it used to be.

And there are other examples that the future isn't what it used to be. "Detroit sees itself as selling nothing but dreams of speed, sex, luxury and horsepower," wrote John Keats in "The Insolent Chariots," a 1958 book about the U.S. automobile industry. The American love affair with the automobile was then at its peak: cars sported tail fins, two-tone paint jobs, and yards of chrome trimming. Construction of the Interstate Highway System had just begun. Gasoline was cheap, and the future looked prosperous beyond measure as far as the auto industry was concerned. But the future isn't what it used to be.

Now much of the effort that automakers once reserved for styling is devoted to meeting federal safety and pollution control standards. Federally mandated mileage standards may be next. Most galling of all, however, is the realization that the day of the full-sized American car is drawing to a close. Reluctantly, but inescapably, Detroit is now thinking small. Some industry observers predict that the shift to small cars will account for 65 to 80% of all auto sales in this country by 1980. The future isn't what it used to be.

More than that, American driving habits will continue to change. Some cities are thinking of banning all cars in the central areas. Americans may wind up not only owning smaller cars but driving them less and holding onto them longer.

In our own city of Lincoln, new alternatives are being sought rather than going ahead as originally planned and widening some streets. People are saying, "So what if it takes me five or ten minutes longer to get to work. It's worth it if we can save some lawns and trees." The future isn't what it used to be.

2. Secondly, not only do we no longer see science and technology as the saviors, but in addition, we no longer believe that economic success and continued growth of the gross national product will guarantee social harmony.

Had anyone in the 1930's been told that the U.S. Gross National Product in the early 1970's would surpass a trillion dollars — effectively doubling the real per capital income within the lifespan of the majority of the population then alive — I am sure he would have felt safe in also predicting an era of unprecedented social peace and good-will.

Yet that enormous economic change has taken place and social harmony has not resulted. The potential for racial disturbance is still high, juvenile disorders are on the increase instead of decrease, as is the crime rate generally. Cities continue to decay, and some are almost bankrupt. And ironically the most dissatisfaction as far as young people are concerned has been seen among those whose parents have been most affluent.

The future isn't what it used to be. A society's health cannot be measured in terms of the growth of the Gross National Product. Jesus teaches us that human beings do not live by bread alone. Yet often our values have assumed that if people get enough things, enough gadgets, they will be happy and satisfied. The human brain, the most complex entity in the known universe has not necessarily evolved merely to aid in the production and consumption of even more trivial goods and services.

The future isn't what it used to be. This is true in all areas of our living, not just in economics and it's not bad news! It simply points out that development is not always in a straight line and not always predictable. We cannot accurately predict the future by merely extending what is happening in the present and expanding it. There are turns and ups and downs and starts and stops. We see through a glass darkly.

Paul is emphasizing the fragmentary nature of all human knowledge. And if we do not recognize the fact, we will be caught holding onto some old forms of knowledge which are quite irrelevant to the responsibilities we face today.

Over against the fragmentary nature of all human knowledge and predictions, Paul emphasized that there are some things that continue, that we can depend on no matter what. "So, faith, hope, love abide, but the greatest of these is love."

In speaking of faith, Paul here means trust. It is faith in an overall, overreaching purpose in life. Trust in God also means trust in life itself, despite the unpredictable turn of events, and the meaninglessness which sometimes drives us to despair. So, faith abides.

Hope, the second of the abiding values, is a particular form of faith. Hope is faith related to the future. This kind of hope is able to rejoice in the whole drama of history, including the anxieties of our age. We do not know whether we will survive or whether the great powers will destroy each other in a nuclear holocaust. We hope we have the wisdom and responsibility to escape this fate in which case we would have a more universal community.

And Paul says, love abides as the greatest of these three. Basically, love here means that life has no meaning except in terms of responsibility; responsibility toward family, toward our nation, toward our civilization and toward the whole world which includes our enemies. This kind of love survives everything and anything.

All these three abide, says Paul, in spite of the fact that we see through a glass darkly; in spite of the fact that the future isn't what it us ed to be.

The fact that the future isn't what it used to be is really good news! If life were only a continuation of what we know in the present, only bigger and expanded, this world would be a pretty boring place. However, the Bible tells us that God is continually making all things new. There are surprises in life. There are moments in history when something totally new happens. And the new thing which occurs is not just an extension of something that already is.

The Bible does not speak of endless progress until we reach utopia. We sometimes think this way, however. Only a few more steps and we will be an educated nation and then all problems will be solved. Or if we could only get rid of all Communists everywhere then the problems of the world would be over. Or if everybody had enough money then we would have complete social harmony. And the list goes on and on. All of this is utopianism.

But the meaning of life is not to be found in such hopes. Nor are better and better gadgets the meaning of life. The meaning of life is to be found in great moments from time to time. A victory here, a success there, a loving relationship, a job well done, a victory over a particular demonic power, the solving of a particular problem even though you know new problems will appear. There is in these moments and others, not total fulfillment, but something creative has occurred. And in that moment, we have experienced eternity.

There is a wonderful symbolism in the last book of the Bible in the idea of the thousand years'rule of Christ in history. In these thousand years, and the number is also only symbolic, the demonic forces are locked up. Again, remember this is all symbolism. The demonic powers a.re not annihilated and they may come to the surf ace again.

And this happens over and over again. We win a battle, we defeat evil for a time, but those forces may return again. And that's the way life is.

So instead of a progressive or empty vision of history, we can think of the great moments for which we are to keep ourselves open, and in which the struggle of the divine and the demonic may be decided, and for those other moments in which we experience a bit of eternity.

The future isn't what it used to be, but life is filled with new beginnings. Fulfillment is going on in every moment here and now, not just at some time in the future. And when we experience these moments of fulfillment, we are elevated out of time into eternity, and it happens over and over again. That's the good news of the Gospel. Amen.