

## ***'The end of the world is nigh'***

*A Sermon preached at Bristol Cathedral on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> November 2018.*

*Daniel 12. 1-3. Mark 13. 1-8.*

*'Repent! The end of the world is nigh!'*

A text – or a pseudo-text – perhaps more readily associated with the sandwich board than the pulpit, especially such a distinguished and restrained a pulpit as this one. It was the text delivered, not via sandwich board but on a rather lurid leaflet, to me and my companions (who included my aunt, my sister, a friend of hers and a friend of mine, a priest who was at that time chaplain of a Cambridge college) as we queued to enter Aintree racecourse on Grand National Day a number of years ago.

The warning – of the imminent end to all things – was a pressing one and was accompanied by an equally urgent enquiry as to whether we were 'saved'. My friend the chaplain assured the leafleter: 'It's quite alright. We've all been confirmed', information that (I fear) occasioned rather more puzzlement than reassurance to the would-be evangelist.

The prophecy of doom is easy to mock. I have just done so. Some of you may know the wonderfully funny sketch for the Amnesty International *Secret Policemen's Ball* event some time ago by the late Peter Cooke, in which a group of disappointed and disgruntled millenarians end their period at the top of the mountain to which they have resorted to await the cataclysm with the words: 'O well. Same time next week, eh, boys?' The reality of cataclysmic disaster, of death and destruction on a literally cosmic scale is so appalling, so unspeakable and unthinkable, that mockery and humour are the only way (it may seem) to deal with it.

Even in our time – in 10 Downing Street this morning, where Daniel's 'time of such anguish such as has never occurred' may actually seem to have arrived – a certain gallows humour may feel eerily appropriate, or even inevitable.

So it is something of a shock to be reminded that the end of the world – complete with fire and brimstone, 'wars and rumours of wars... earthquakes in various places ... famines...' and all the rest of it is a central promise of the New Testament. No joke. No kidding. Embarrassing, extreme, absurd, intemperate and over the top – hugely removed from the civilised and restrained discourse of our usual praying and philosophising – the end of all things is an idea and a promise that we have to take seriously.

Indeed, it may be that in our contemporary world – the world of ecological disaster, of unpredictable political development in this continent and elsewhere, of suicide bomb, holocaust and genocide and so much more to unsettle and terrorise us – such expectation of the end may be all the easier to envisage.

If we are feeling like this, that our age (for whatever reason) is hugely likely to be the time for total cataclysm, then we may be sure that we are in good company and familiar territory, historically speaking. For every age has looked on these texts – these prophecies – and quaked at the possibility that they may be on the point of fulfilment. For in every age there are 'wars and rumours of wars ... earthquakes and famines...' In every age the consciousness of chaos looming just beyond sight is and has been a powerful and a baleful threat.

Our civilisation – the order that we bring to our relationships, to our environment and to our communities – is (as we know) a fragile thing. The centenary we have been keeping over the last few weeks is ample reminder, if such were needed. Anarchy and collapse threaten. They always have.

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This being the case, it is extraordinary – bizarre, even – to note that for the New Testament writers the end of the world in cataclysmic destruction of all order, all predictability, all safety and comfort and law, is not *threat* but *promise*.

‘This’, says Jesus, ‘is but the beginning of the birth pangs’. And the birth that this labour presages is the coming forth of no less than the Rule of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, where righteousness, justice, freedom and mercy are what characterise reality, rather than order, convention, control or what the world calls security.

A birth is a wonderful event, and also a somewhat terrifying one. There is danger and mess and pain; there is disturbance and wonder and delight in an extraordinary combination. It is no accident that the breaking in of the Rule of God should be likened to this bloody, screaming, fantastic, chaotic, exciting-beyond-all-measure event.

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So, we may ask, along with the disciples, ‘when will these things be and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?’ Will it be in our time or will the fears and hopes of our contemporaries be as hollow as those of our predecessors apparently have been?

Well, I have no doubt at all that the Kingdom of God is, indeed, nigh: wherever the orderliness I have created to reassure myself (my safe cocoon) cracks and breaks up (as it surely will for it is only as strong as I am, and that’s not very strong); or wherever the veneer of human civilisation shatters (as it surely will, for we’re all pretty fragile); wherever – in other words – there are wars and conflicts (in my heart, or yours, in our world, our relationships, our communities); wherever there are earthquakes and famines (literal or metaphorical); wherever there is loss of faith, hope or life – *there* we may know that the Kingdom of God has come near. In the sign of the Crucified One, bleeding on his cross and glorious in his resurrection. Amen.