

The Christian religion is apocalyptic. By that I mean that Christians, informed by our Scriptures, have always been on the lookout for the new thing that God is doing. We have inherited, from Jesus, his Jewish forbears, and from the early Christians, a worldview of 'ages' that replace one another, a sense that history is moving in a certain direction. God rings down a curtain on one era, while nurturing the seeds of hope for the next.

Our Scriptures lead us to expect that there will be decisive, sometimes even catastrophic, moments in history when everything changes. Some of these moments come with great suffering – and in fact turbulence and trouble can be the primary signs of these times. It can even seem as though God has abandoned this world, leaving us to the mess that as humans we repeatedly make of our human societies. But always, there is the reassurance that Christ is near, and at work in the darkness, bringing about God's new era.

In Advent, as we wait to re-immers ourselves in the story of Christ's birth, we also renew our hold on the promise that Christ will ultimately bring about an ending to the world as we know it – a world that is sinful and broken and full of strife – to usher in the fullness of God's just and peaceable kingdom.

Our Gospel reading today is one of those parts of Scripture that urgently tries to re-focus us on this horizon, this ending, bringing it right up close and challenging us to live as though it could happen at any moment.

There is a lot of foolishness that gets taught and written and believed about 'end times' and the apocalypse. People become convinced that certain images in Scripture match up exactly to people and events that are happening in the world. They work themselves into a froth believing that they've cracked the code and Christ's return is imminent. Some Christian people simply fail to hear Jesus saying "about that day or hour no one knows" – including Jesus himself. However, at the other end of the spectrum, we can get too detached from the urgency that Jesus and his first followers clearly felt about the winding up of the wicked age they saw themselves as living through and their longing for a new heavens and a new earth. We need to be on our guard against that complacency.

Those of us who live centuries after the destruction of the Jewish temple and the persecutions and horrors of the Roman empire may well feel as though our ancestors in the faith overstated the urgency because of the intensity of the times they were suffering through.

Certainly, later Christian theology has had to soften the sharp edges of expectation that led to the apostles' world-denying teaching. It's one thing to say, for example, "don't marry, give up all your possessions, embrace suffering for Christ" when you think the world is going to end in the next 20 years or so. When you can be reasonably assured that you're going to live into old age, and that there will be generations after you, you have to figure out a different way to relate to those more radical claims of the gospel – but somehow without falling asleep on the job.

So what do we do with this kind of Scripture passage? How *do* we "keep awake" when the man who went on a journey leaving his slaves in charge has been gone for hundreds of years, and the slaves in the household now are the great-great-great grandchildren of the ones who were originally tasked with the work of keeping the house and the fields?

I find it helpful to remember that the apocalyptic symbols and imagery of Scripture don't belong to any one time – whether the time of Daniel, or Jesus or the early church, or to the second coming. They don't just represent the empires of Babylon or Rome, or the people of ancient Israel, or the first Christians. The intense and sometimes frightening picture language of the Bible can be applied again and again in different historical periods to alert us to the ongoing contest between God and Satan on this earth. That is, there's a struggle that's always being played out between those who are faithful to God's vision of justice and love, and those who have been seduced by power, greed and cruelty.

We don't know how far away we are from the final horizon, but we can learn to recognise and read the patterns of our own time through imagery of Scripture. And when we do this faithfully, we can avoid being dragged onto the wrong side of the ongoing struggle being played out on our earth and instead work actively as agents for the good. As Christopher Hutson puts it, "the enemy is not any one empire...all political and economic powers...seek their own, worldly agendas at the expense of ordinary people... the powers that be will lull us to sleep by reassuring us that they have our best interests at heart as they pursue their worldly agendas. They play to our fears, our prejudices, our self-interests, so we do not notice their demonic behaviours. Beware. Keep alert."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Theological Perspective in Feasting on the Word 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of Advent year B Gospel.

Our job is to make the connections between the language of the Bible, and the things that are going on in our own world. And here's an example of where that becomes difficult. In some parts of Scripture, God encourages and reassures the people of Israel in their experience of exile and suffering. They receive promises that they and their homeland will be restored. In other parts of Scripture God blasts the leaders of Israel for their indifference to the poor and turning to military strength instead of trusting in God's care. That is, God's chosen people are sometimes victims to be healed, and sometimes on the receiving end of justified wrath for their arrogance and misuse of power. We can't, then, naively say, as some do, that the modern day state of Israel must always be supported and defended. That depends, to be blunt, on whether or not they behave righteously. We can't say, in fact, that any one person or group is always a victim, or always an oppressor.

Closer to home, as we engage with this liturgical season of Advent, it's so easy to be drawn into and distracted by the frenzy of busyness and commerce that absolutely dominates the landscape around us at this time of year. On the one hand giving gifts, sharing food and enjoying family time helps us share in the wonderful, astonishing gift of God to us in Christ and the love that has been given to us in family and friends by a God of relationship. The incarnation invites us to relish the goodness of this earth and enjoy this physical world with all its delights. But what if the relentless planning and shopping cause us to turn a blind eye to the human and environmental costs of the consumer systems we're in? What if they make us ignore the distress and exclusion of those who can't participate? What if the ways we celebrate the season cause us to miss the most important thing – the coming of Christ?

This is why, over coming weeks, we will reacquaint ourselves with the strange and difficult John the Baptist and the powerful words of the Magnificat. Let's listen closely to them and ask ourselves – how does God act in a world where evil presses on nearly every situation? What are the signs of the authentic action of God? May we tune our hearts to recognise the Christ when he comes, as a baby in a manger, and in the crises that dominate our age.