**Mark 13:24-end: The End of the World**

*Isaiah 64:1-9, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Bishop’s Sermon, 29.11.20*

It’s a common enough phrase, one that you and I probably use from time to time. There’s been a minor disaster – not life-changing but annoying all the same. And after being upset for a while, we find ourselves shrugging our shoulders and saying something like this, ‘Well, it’s a pain - but to be honest, it’s not the end of the world’.

And it’s that phrase ‘It’s not the end of the world’ that raises a big question every time Christians worship together on Advent Sunday. For if breaking that vase or spilling that milk or fluffing that audition or receiving that unfortunately worded email is ‘not the end of the world’, how, I wonder, do we think the world *will* end? What hope do we hold for the future of our planet?

All through our lifetimes, and way before that too, scientists, futurologists and science-fiction writers have had a field day trying to answer that question. In the 1960s and ‘70s, when I was growing up, the Cold War fuelled speculation of a nuclear holocaust in which Man would press the button of his own destruction – a possible scenario which certainly hasn’t gone away in the intervening decades. In the 1980s, the threat of environmental catastrophe took centre stage: humankind again destroying the world as we know it, but doing so gradually, bit by bit, rather than in a sudden moment of madness – and again that debate has only sharpened as year succeeds to year. And in 2020, of course, the nightmare scenario of a global pandemic has come far too close to home, reminding us again of the fragility of the human race, whatever our extraordinary abilities and extraordinary flaws.

The entertainment industry, of course, has profited from many of these ideas, with big-budget movies speculating on various end-time scenarios. Whether it’s the aliens of ‘Independence Day’ – the virus of ‘Chain Reaction’ – the meteorite of ‘Deep Impact’ or the robotic world of ‘Terminator’, our fascination with the end of the world is big business. The film ‘Artificial Intelligence’, which was issued in 2001, just three months before 9/11, spoke of a world flooded and taken over by computers. Its footage included chilling scenes of a New York with the twin towers destroyed – perhaps the ultimate symbol, in producer Stephen Spielberg’s eyes, of a world in crisis.

So what of the Church? Well, we haven’t always had a good track record when it comes to our end-of-the-world speculations. It’s partly that some of the Bible texts, especially the book of Revelation, are written in a form that is largely alien to us today, the coded language of the so-called ‘apocalyptic’ literature. It’s partly too that this has traditionally been the province of fanatics and cults: ranging from the little man on the street corner holding up his placard: ‘Repent: The End is Nigh!’ to major sects like the Jehovah’s Witnesses who’ve determined the date of Armageddon in advance, and have had to revise their theology when the date has duly come and gone. On one of my favourite walks from the village of Shere, we pass the so-called Catholic Apostolic Church, which itself was built on the principle that Christ would return in its founders’ lifetime.

When life is tough for the people of God - especially in countries where there’s poverty, oppression or persecution – thoughts about the end times (both personal and global) come alive in fresh ways. They’re expressed in many of those beautiful spirituals that emerged from the horrors of the slave trade, including one that I regularly heard coming over the garden fence during my 12 years as a vicar in Twickenham: ‘Swing Low, sweet chariot, coming for to carry me home’. But when life’s going well, when people’s focus is on feathering their nest in this world rather than preparing for the next, interest in such teaching usually wanes. And so we leave this area to the scientists and the novelists, to the film makers and the religious fanatics, rather than trying to understand what Jesus has to teach us on this extraordinarily important theme.

And that’s a problem. Because if we don’t understand where we’ve come from *or* where we’re going to, it’s likely to make us feel pretty insecure. If I simply believe that the world as a whole (and humanity as a part of it) was *created* by chance not purpose, as the result of an entirely random cosmic big bang followed by an entirely random process of evolution - if I believe that the world (and humanity as a part of it) will equally be *destroyed* by chance not purpose, or by the sheer stupidity of those who once considered themselves the apex of that random evolutionary process – then what’s the point of it all? And while as Christians we may find it hard to enter into the strange imagery of the apocalyptic literature, just as future civilisations will find some of our imagery very strange indeed, how important that we hold fast to this vital truth: that a God who is Love and Light was there at the beginning, and a God who is Love and Light will be there at the end, and you and I are called to a state of readiness as we await His coming.

That’s the message of today’s gospel reading from Mark chapter 13; but while the film ‘Artificial Intelligence’ chose a burnt-out Twin Towers as a symbol of apocalyptic disaster, the equivalent in today’s reading was the Jerusalem Temple, whose imminent destruction Jesus foresaw.

The Temple in Jerusalem, of course, was far more than a potent image. It was seen as the place where God dwelt, where heaven and earth met, a forward-looking signpost to the Creator’s ultimate intention to bring the two together. Its destruction, in that sense, *would* be the ‘end of the world’, certainly the ‘end of the world as we know it’.

Earlier prophets like 2nd Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel had had to interpret the destruction of the first Temple, King Solomon’s Temple, in their day. As Isaiah reflected on the ‘holy and beautiful house destroyed by fire’, in today’s Old Testament reading, so he recognised afresh his fragility and that of God’s people: ‘we are the clay and you are the Potter’. Jesus was now doing the same for the second Temple, which had risen from the ashes in the days of Ezra, Nehemiah and Zerubbabel. And so Jesus predicted that the Temple would be destroyed, and carnage would ensue, and all within a generation; and sure enough, that’s just what happened, so that by end of the first Jewish-Roman War in 73 AD, more than a million Jews had died from starvation or the sword, and their beloved Temple had been burnt to the ground, never – thus far at least – to rise again.

But the destruction of this Heaven-and-Earth building heralded something bigger still. As Jesus sat with his disciples on the Mount of Olives, overlooking the Temple, he spoke of an indeterminate period of human history in which there would be wars, earthquakes, famines, and growing intolerance and persecution. He spoke too of strange teachings springing up, of an increase of wickedness and a growing hardness of heart. There’s nothing here except a brutal realism, which reminds us that Christian hope must never be confused with naïve optimism.

Yet the great thing about this chapter is that there’s hope here, too: indeed, the best of all hopes. When Jesus talked about wars, earthquakes and famines, we might have expected him to say, ‘*These are signs that the world is about to die.’* Instead, he said, *‘All these are the beginning of birth pains’.* When Jesus used the apocalyptic language of the sun and moon being darkened, and stars falling from the sky, we might have expected him to go on: *‘And so the world will be burned to a crisp.’*  Instead, he said, *‘At that time… they will see the Son of Man coming… with great power and glory’.*

That imagery of ‘birth pains’ seems to me particularly powerful – or ‘pregnant’, as we might say! Because while I’ve only experienced birth pains at second hand, as a hapless husband whose hand is being squeezed to a pulp, others of us will have faced the full force of what Jesus is talking about. But what’s the result of all that pain? In all but a few tragic cases, a beautiful, precious baby. And the pain of the world: the sickness and suffering that is part of life on earth, not least in this Corona year, is like that too, says Jesus. It’s not just chance or bad luck, or a sign that God is nasty, or that there’s no God at all. It’s rather the labour pains of the new creation – the new heaven and new earth - that God is bringing into being through His Spirit and the return of His Son.

About that return, Jesus says, *‘No-one knows about that date or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father’.* But while the details are uncertain, the key thing for us is this: that quote, we need to ‘*Keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come’.*

So here’s the main point of the Bible’s teaching about the end of the world. It’s not for entertainment, with the book of Revelation representing the ultimate disaster movie. It’s not for speculation, with the Bible as a kind of Enigma Code which needs cracking. No, Jesus’ teaching is there both to encourage and to challenge.

The encouragement, which we all need right now, is this: that whatever the future holds – whatever *our* future holds - **God is in control.** That’s not an excuse for apathy or fatalism, of course, just letting the world around us go to seed. Far from it. But it is a reason for hope, a hope based fair and square both on Jesus’ teaching, and on his death and resurrection from the dead. Jesus can’t be accused of wishful thinking in Mark 13. He predicted that things would get very dark indeed: but he also said, *‘These are the beginning of birth pains’.*

Life isn’t meaningless. The existence of our planet isn’t down to pure chance or blind Fate. So our lives aren’t meaningless either: we were brought into this world for a purpose, and our calling is to discover that purpose and to live it out, however fallibly, in the power of God’s Spirit.

And what’s the challenge? It’s simply this: that we don’t know when the end of the world will come. We don’t even know when the end of *our* world will come. So we need to be on our guard - to be ready at all times to leave this life and to meet our God. We need to be keeping our relationships pure, our hearts free from bitterness, our ambitions set not on building our own little kingdoms but on building the Kingdom of God. And I’m not being morbid here. I’m not suggesting that we follow some of our gloomier Christian ancestors and ask for a coffin for Christmas to remind us of our own mortality! But I am wondering, ‘Are we ready to meet with God? Are we confident of our eternal destiny?’

The truth is, you see, that it *is* possible to be confident: that it is possible to know that whatever the future holds - whether we live to the ripe old age of 107 or whether I walk out of my home this morning and fall under a number 35 bus - our loving God will be with us into all eternity.

To close with the promise of St Paul from our epistle reading today:

*He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful: by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

To Him be the glory, Amen.