

## THE 'LAST THINGS' - 2

### The return of Christ and the end of the world.

Two weeks ago I spoke to you about the various possibilities that an individual can face at death. Today I would like to speak to you briefly about traditional beliefs concerning what the future holds for the whole universe.

Let us begin with the belief that the universe will come to an end one day. This idea has its origins in ancient Israel's conviction that God created the world for a purpose and a day will come when God will gather all the nations and every individual and judge whether they fostered or tried to hinder that purpose. This was originally a consoling thought for Israel since they saw judgement day as the day when their enemies would be conquered once and for all and subjected to God's kingly rule. But Israel's frequent sins against justice to their neighbours and obedience to their God led the prophets to warn them that it would be a day on which they and not their enemies would suffer. As a result the end of the world came to be seen as the final chapter of the battle between good and evil in the world. It came to be seen as a time when God once and for all defeats evil and destroys our evil world. Not surprisingly, it was thought that the end of the world was going to be a terrifying experience for most people and it remains a fearful prospect to this day.

However, the very opposite should be the case for those who love God and neighbour. For it is meant to be the day on which the whole universe will share fully in Christ's salvation. St Paul (Rom 8:18) tells us that the entire universe feels the impact of sin on it and groans for the time when it will share in the transformation brought about by Christ's resurrection. And the last chapter of the Bible ends with a vision of a new heaven and a new earth – we could say of a new universe, with new physical laws, laws that enable us to love with a fullness that would otherwise not be the case. The end of the world is therefore something we should be hoping and praying for most earnestly and indeed we do so every time we recite the our father and pray thy kingdom come.

Any statements we may make about the nature of the future that awaits us and the universe have to be clothed in symbols and metaphors because they are beyond our present comprehension. Even a concept like the end of the world would perhaps be more accurately described as the day the whole world is cleansed from all sin and transformed by Christ's grace. But precisely how this will happen we do not know. Perhaps, if God wished it, the old world will never come to an end. It may just continue on and on producing an endless stream of thinking and loving beings to share in God's communal life. I personally believe that the new heavens and the new earth exist already on the other side of the grave and there may be no reason why these two universes –

the old and the new - cannot live forever side by side. But such an idea is sheer speculation.

Central to the traditional concept of the end of the world is the idea of the return of Christ. It has its roots in the fact that Christ did not do what the Messiah was expected to do – namely to create a just and sinless society on this earth where God would reign unhindered. So the early Christians came up with the notion that Christ would come a second time to finish the job. Like so many statements about the end of the world, I do not believe this needs to be taken literally. *Strictly speaking Christ cannot return for the simple reason that he already did so on the day of his resurrection and since then has never left us.* He is present to us all the time and the most potent embodiment of that presence is the Eucharist.

So all the attempts that have been made down the centuries to calculate or deduce precisely when Christ will return are pointless and, unsurprisingly, none have proved correct. Christ returned centuries ago on the day he rose from the dead and the universe on that side of the grave has already, I believe, been transformed by Christ. But his presence is different from what it used to be. It is no longer bound by space and time and never will be. When we die he is present to greet us and introduce us to the new heavens and earth in which he and our forebears now live. At death we all will have our own experience of the “return” of Christ

If this is so, then there is no need to discuss theories about thousand year reigns before the final end comes and raptures for those still living to be carried up to heaven or a trumpet to announce all this. All these ideas are rooted in apocalyptic literature that is steeped in symbolism, the core meaning of which has to be unpacked from its thousands of years old cultural wrapping and then repacked in a way that will enable us to have a better understanding of it.

And with that my series of reflections on our faith come to an end.

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