

The end is nigh

I seem to be getting the short straw in terms of preaching at the moment. Last week I had to preach on a convoluted argument Jesus had with the Sadducees about the resurrection - in the light of a woman having seven husbands – now today an equally complex and difficult passage about the End of all things. By the time, I reach the end of this sermon you might be grateful that it is the End if you see what I mean.

Those of you who are of mature years will remember walking down streets in London or in other big cities and coming across men with placards declaring that the End is nigh and handing out pamphlets saying that to avoid being burnt in Hell when that end came you had to turn to Jesus. For a small child the thought of such an End coming soon – would it be tomorrow or a few weeks a time – would I manage to have a birthday before it happened – was it going to happen before or after Christmas - was a frightening experience.

What is just as frightening to me today – is not that I believe that the End is nigh – but that there are still people who believe that it is imminent. Indeed there was someone at our men's breakfast a couple of weeks ago (not someone from this congregation I hasten to add ) who asked a question about the End of Time and professed he thought it was about to happen. I did not find his reasons for believing that very conclusive.

But perhaps what is even more frightening is that the belief strongly held by lots of right wing American Christians that it is alright to destroy the earth's delicately balanced ecosystem – because this will bring on the end of time! So you don't have to care for the environment and you can drive your gas guzzling cars – because you are doing the human race a great service by destroying the earth and bringing on the great Day of Judgement. Like a great deal of religion things that come from America, I find that really scary and extremely warped..

So what are we to make of all this – particularly in the light of today's gospel reading from St. Luke. We need to understand that the belief that Jesus would come again and bring an End to all things was a powerful factor in the early Church – it underpinned much of what was initially taught and handed down – it spurred believers into action because they did not think they had much time left to make all people my disciples as Jesus had commanded them – and it meant that they were constantly looking for the signs of when this was to happen.

But as years went by nothing did happen and even when the most abominable things took place – like the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem – things that were supposed to signal the End – when even those did not trigger the imminent end of all time – people then began to ask whether in fact they had got it wrong and that this End was not imminent at all – that perhaps it was not God's plan after all.

So it was that when St. Luke sat down to write his version of the gospel story, he did so knowing that all kinds of events had happened that had been interpreted as signs of an imminent End – but that this had not taken place – so it was wise to try to make some sense of all this.

So in this passage that we had for our gospel today St. Luke has Jesus warning people not to be led astray in thinking that the End is nigh. He says that many will come in my name and say “The time is near” – do not believe them.

And then he says that there will be terrifying things happening in the world – like wars, insurrections, like earthquakes and famines and plagues – but do not be fooled into thinking that this is the beginning of the End. It is simply not the case that the End will follow on immediately.

This is St. Luke trying to make the church look away from their pre-occupation with the imminent end of the world. It was for him a distraction from what he considered to be the purpose of the church – and that was certainly not sitting around and waiting for the heavens to open and Jesus coming down to wind everything up. So he reminds his readers of Jesus’ words about what Christian people might expect before all this happens.

And the message is not all that encouraging. These Christians can expect to be arrested and persecuted – they will be treated like lawbreakers and handed over to those in positions of power in the land – they will appear before kings and governors and will be expected to give a good defence of their faith. Even worse is predicted, some will be betrayed by parents and relatives and friends – some will pay the ultimate price of death – and if you call yourself a Christian you will need to learn not to be liked. The message is stark and simple : the end of the world is not about to come and you had better prepare for many times when your faith is tested and your courage challenged – for you will be faced by many difficulties on account of your belief in Christ.

If that was true then for the Christian church at the time St. Luke was writing does it have any relevance for us today. Betrayal, arrest, imprisonment and execution – we have to confess that such trials are not those we face . For we are not Filipino Christians working in Saudi Arabia, or tens of thousands of believers reportedly suffering persecution in North Korean labour camps or Christian booksellers being murdered in Gaza. We need to realise that in some places of the world the decision to be a Christian is as dangerous as it was in the time of St. Luke and Christ’s warning just as relevant.

So we are not promised that being a follower of Christ is going to be sweetness and light or even a bed of roses. And the good Lord is not coming tomorrow to sweep us up into the glories of heaven. But what we do get promised by Jesus is that if we stand firm, we will gain life. I think I know what he means by that - I think also that it is a precious and wonderful promise - and that is good enough for me.