

Signs of the end

The end of the world... when is going to take place, what will happen, and what will be the signs of its coming? It seems that throughout history people have had a sometimes rather unhealthy fascination with this topic and it has meant that they have often been prone to speculation about that great day when God will finally intervene and bring down the curtain on history. So early Christians seem to have believed that the Lord Jesus would return soon and that the end would come; and centuries later there was an early Doomsday sect known as the Lotharingian Computists who deduced that the world would end on Good Friday March 25th 970. And when that date came and went they revised their calculations and decided that the year 1000 was the obvious date, and when that didn't happen they revised it 1033 to take into account the date of the crucifixion. And so it has gone on: September 23rd 1186, April 5th 1761, April 28th 1843, June 25th 1982, May 21st 2011: all told it has been estimated that in the past 2000 years there have been over 200 confident prophecies, not just that the world would end soon but specifying the date.

So what prompts such speculation? Why are we so prone to fixating on the end of the world? Well, in some cases it is because things are not going well. Conjecture about the end of the world surfaces sometimes in periods of great tumult and conflict, or when plagues are rampant or natural disasters have occurred and it seems that things can't get much worse. These are construed as signs that God is about to break in and to bring the whole show to a conclusion.

Well, if that is what prompts the conviction that the world is about to end, then it might find some basis of support in our reading this morning from Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. It is not entirely clear what is going on here and it is not helped by the fact that our reading this morning misses out some difficult but important verses. But, basically, the story seems to be as follows: evidently there are people in the church at Thessalonica who believe that the end of the world is taking place. Paul here does not call it 'the end of the world' – he calls it 'the day of the Lord', drawing on the Old Testament. And there were Scriptures from the Old Testament that indeed suggested that the Day of the Lord would be a day of darkness and not light, that it would come with upheaval, calamity and distress. And we might speculate as to what

might have happened to provoked people in the Church at Thessalonica to draw this conclusion that the Day of the Lord was upon them. Certainly they were living in turbulent times. The church had experienced persecution. Some years previously the notorious, megalomaniac Roman Emperor Caligula, convinced of his own divinity and in a fit of anger against the Jews, had ordered a statue of himself to be erected in the temple in Jerusalem. This had provoked massive Jewish protests and unrest, and only Caligula's assassination prevented an uprising. And in years since then the Roman Empire had been convulsed with the deaths of four emperors in quick succession, and that turbulence would lead eventually to the sacking of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple by the Romans in AD 70. These were the kinds of eruptions of evil that explode every so often throughout history, as we are all too aware this morning on this occasion. And Christians may see them as signs of the end.

Well, if this what was what was happening in the church at Thessalonica, Paul instructs the Thessalonians to be cautious and to be patient. The end is not yet. Paul seems to anticipate that before the end comes there will be one particular manifestation of evil – what he refers to in our passage as ‘the man of lawlessness’ who will be associated with what Paul calls here ‘the great rebellion’. This will be a sign that the end is near. And if we had read on in the passage, the verses that we skipped, we would find Paul saying that until that final rebellion comes and that ultimate man of lawlessness appears evil is being restrained, kept in check, in preparation of the final convulsion. And at times throughout history Christians have speculated as to whether or not the final rebellion has at last come and with it the man of lawlessness. And doubtless there were those who saw all this in the rise of Nazi Germany and of Hitler. Here at last were the signs that the Day of the Lord was finally arriving. And there are Christians today who look at our world and conclude that end is nigh, that the Day of the Lord is near. They would argue that if we are wise we will discern the signs of the end, and many Christians believe for example that the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 was such a sign; and there are Christians that believe that the European Union is such a sign – I guess that is likely to put them in the Brexit camp - and there are other Christians who discern other signs, like the rise of Islam.

So what are we to say about this? Well, we could discuss and argue at length about the Day of the Lord and what it means and when and how it will

come, and we could dispute endlessly about the signs. But there are two points that I would suggest that we can take from all this. The first concerns the reality and the persistence of evil. Paul's view of history seems to be that while Christ has secured a decisive victory over evil it is still a continuing reality, prone to erupt with particular viciousness at different times – indeed with evil we are confronted by a mystery that goes beyond human understanding and that has spiritual dimensions that leave us ultimately powerless. And this is not good news to modern, secular, enlightened people. The secular world struggles to make any sense of evil at all because it ought to be something we can master and control, like everything else. Here we are, twenty-first century post-Enlightenment people with ever increasingly sophisticated technology at our disposal: why is it that the previous century was so blood-soaked and fraught with conflict? And how is it that this century seems to be following the same trajectory? We ought to be doing better! In so many ways life has improved and life expectancy has increased and diseases eradicated and yet still we are capable of such inhumanity and barbarity. And as ecological devastation continues and resources become scarcer and more in demand the likelihood is that we will find ourselves increasingly at war and in conflict with one another. If the message of a conference I attended this week at the VU is anything to go by, where recent wars have been fought over oil, future wars will be fought over water. And so evil and death morph and adapt and continue to wreak havoc. And as Christians we should be very sceptical when enlightened and progressive 21st century people speak glibly of the future with great optimism and suggest that we can transform the world and establish a realm of peace and prosperity where there will be no more war. They literally do not know what they are talking about. They do not understand or grasp the reality of evil.

Another crucial point, however. We have talked about signs of the end – be it Israel or the EU or Islam and these are all contested and disputed. There is however one undisputable sign of the end – one unambiguous and clear sign that Paul refers to in this passage. And what is that? Well, before we deal with that, there is something that we have to understand. When the Bible talks about the last days it may be referring to the days leading up to the final day, the Day of the Lord. But it may be referring to something else. It may be referring to the much longer period of history that stretches back to the resurrection and exaltation of Christ. In the New Testament those are also the last days: the period from AD 33 when the world changed with Christ's victory, until the

end: that long stretch of history constitutes ‘the last days’. And in that time God has given us a sign: a sign that Jesus is Lord, Lord over evil and death. And what is that sign? Well, it is the church. The church is the sign for the last days: the sign that Jesus and not evil is Lord and that the Day of the Lord will come. So, near the end of his ministry Jesus said to his disciples: ‘the good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all nations – you could say, ‘as a sign to all nations’ – and then the end will come.’ And that is why Paul in our reading, after talking about evil and the man of lawlessness and the rebellion, then goes on to speak of the church, what he calls the first fruits of salvation. And he tells the Thessalonians in v.15 to stand firm and to hold fast, for we are the sign that God has given the world in the last days that Jesus is Lord.

You see, I’ve talked about the persistence of evil, the fact that it will not go away. It continues even despite human progress. But what about the persistence of the church? That is a miracle, for the church is not a human institution. It is the Body of Christ, God’s very creation. And from Paul’s day until now there have been efforts to destroy it. And at times the church has effectively destroyed itself by succumbing to power and corruption and oppression. But always there has been a witness, always a testimony to the glory of Christ – always a sign. In World War II Hitler tried to neutralise and effectively destroy the church by getting it to collude with him and the German church largely succumbed. But not entirely. Brave and faithful Christians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and defied Hitler by establishing what was called the Confessing Church, keeping the witness alive, maintaining the sign.

So we may disagree about the end of the world and what are and what are not signs of its coming. But there is one sign we cannot dispute - and brothers and sisters, we are that sign. So stand firm and hold fast. Stand firm in worship. Stand firm against evil. Hold fast in prayer. Hold fast to those whose lives are ensnared by evil. Stand firm as a sign that Jesus is Lord: and do that until the Day of the Lord comes, and the reign of peace dawns and war is no more. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,
Eternal source and end of all things:
we praise and worship you today.
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we praise and worship you today.

We rejoice in the wonder of your creation:
we give thanks that you have given us life,
and that you have given us one another,
and you have given us a world to delight in.
All around us are signs of your handiwork
and we would honour you, the Maker.

O God, forgive us for our destructive ways.
Forgive us that we threaten what you have made.
And this morning we especially pray for forgiveness
for war, and for all its horror.
We pray for forgiveness for the ease with which
we resort to war,
for the casualties and victims of war,
for all the ways in which your world is scarred
by conflict and by our inhumanity to one another.
We confess our share in such a world,
our failures to seek and to establish peace
even in our own lives.

O God have mercy upon us and forgive us.
Hold on to us and do not let us go.
Keep faith with us and lead us into ways of righteousness.
Show us the things that make for peace.
And we thank you that you have given us Jesus,
the prince of peace, who has come and made peace
by blood of his cross.
Help us we pray to live in that power.
And we pray all these things in his name,
joining together in the words that he taught us...