

FIRST OF ADVENT

Jesus said to his disciples, "In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in clouds" with great power and glory. "

However strange and incomprehensible these words may sound to the modern listener, one thing comes across with unmistakable clarity. There is a sense of great urgency - a sense of crisis. The urgent crisis which is the theme of the text is the second coming of Christ - that event which we refer to week by week in our creed, when we say together "And he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead: whose kingdom shall have no end."

The whole New Testament prospect of a second coming of Christ - to judge both the quick and the dead - to bring about the final triumph of Christ over Satan, is, to the 20th. century mind, a fantasy - it is incredible - beyond belief. The Biblical accounts of the Last Judgement seem to most people of our time as incredible as the Biblical accounts of creation were to our Victorian grandparents or great-grandparents. Or it may be that the Genesis stories of creation worried the Victorians who were the first generation to confront the ideas of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution - whereas the Biblical doctrine of the End of creation is of more concern to people as we approach the end of the 2nd. millennium. After all, we are much more aware of the vulnerability of our planet than they were. We inhabit a world where the concept of a Nuclear holocaust is a distinct possibility -

where the collapse of the ozone layer could lead to uncontrolled global warming - where the threat of chemical or germ warfare could lead to the extinction of human life. These things did not concern the people of Victorian Britain. Our concept of the world has changed dramatically in the last two hundred years. People of our generation are becoming more concerned about the ultimate fate of our planet. People of the 3rd. millennium will be the first in the history of the human race to be faced with the very real possibility of the end of the world. What does the Christian faith have to offer this generation to help them come to terms with this reality?

On the face of it the Biblical teaching about the end of all things isn't very promising. Two chapters in the Gospel of Matthew (24, & 25), and one in Mark 13, contain the teaching of Jesus on the Last Times, and one of Paul's letters (Thessalonians) is devoted to expounding that teaching. Basically what these tell us is that at the end of the world, Jesus will come again - this time not as a humble prophet but as a triumphant king who will welcome the righteous into a heavenly existence and will condemn sinners to eternal damnation.

What are we, as we approach the end of the 2nd. millennium, to make of all this?

I must confess that when some of these bible passages are read aloud in church services, I'm thankful that some of my non-churchgoing friends are not here. And the reason is, that if asked the question, "you don't really believe that do you?" - I would

find it hard, if not impossible, to defend. 'Those days will bring distress such as never has been until now since the beginning of the world.' In the parallel passage in St. Matthew's gospel it says, 'Then there will be two men in the field; one will be taken, the other left.' Left to what? Could it be Eternal damnation that is being referred to? If so, how can this be the same Jesus whom we know as our saviour and the friend of sinners? Are we to understand that there is a limit to his patience and love? How can he say on the one hand that we should love our enemies and then turn around and destroy his?

This omnipotent God - capable of all things - Almighty God - who taught us through his Son Jesus Christ to love and forgive - even our enemies - is yet free to damn those who have offended him - eternally! Is God above his moral law?

And again, what is to be gained by threatening sinners with eternal punishment? Do we think that we can scare people into the kingdom of God? You know and I know that we can't. We can only love people into the Kingdom of God.

Does this mean then, that the teaching of Jesus and of St. Paul, is of no value to this generation? No - of course not - it is of great value - provided we understand it in the context in which it was written. What lies behind the teaching of the last things is a challenge. It is a challenge to live each day as if it were our last day. To value our life as a precious gift of God and not to waste it. To allow the Holy Spirit of God to direct and rule our hearts and to keep awake for we do not know which day will be our last.

We are stewards of God's creation and are charged with the responsibility of caring for it. As the farmer's proverb has it, "We must live as if each day were our last, but we must farm as if we will live for ever".

AMEN