

## Sermon: The Christian Faith & the End of the World St Michael & All Angels

Today we celebrate our Patronal Festival of St Michael and All Angels, so it is right that this fifth sermon in the series on Christian basics should be about the end of the world. Only a few minutes ago we heard those strange words: *There was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon.*

Last Ascension Day the Choral Eucharist on Radio Four was broadcast from St Giles, Cripplegate. It was a lovely setting by Haydn. But then they came to the sermon. The preacher said that on the first Ascension Day the Apostles believed they were approaching the end of the world. She went on to say that the Apostles were wrong. But we today in the City of London have the advantage over the Apostles. We *know* that we are approaching the end of the world – because of global warming.

This is the sort of crass literal-mindedness which gets apocalyptic writing a bad name. When the Bible tells us about the end of the world, it doesn't mean us to take it literally. *And there were four beasts with eyes before and behind.* The man who wrote this was an ecstatic prophet and poet. We're not to imagine him as some punctilious clerk in pinstripes telling us about the new set of trade figures. Or consider this: *And there appeared in heaven a great wonder: a woman clothed with the sun.* You're not meant to ask whether her outfit was *Roberto Cavalli* or just something she picked up in *M&S*. Then there is that haunting line: *There was silence in heaven for the space of about half an hour.* Do they have *Rolex* beyond the pearly gates then?

All the prophets were ecstatic poets and their evocations of the end of the world and beyond were uttered out of the mind at the end of its tether. This had to be so, because the end of the world and the hereafter is where we all reach the end of our tether. The concepts of the end of the world, heaven and hell, are limiting concepts. We cannot know what these things are like literally – because they are beyond death and time and space. St Paul tells us plainly: *For now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face.*

This is what apocalyptic, prophetic, visionary speech and writing is like. You don't think that Elijah's valley of dry bones was the remains of pork chops and lamb shanks do you? Visionary utterance is and has to be beyond our ken. It is always born out of anxiety and mental turmoil. This is the case whether it is an Old Testament prophet rending his garments and walking around naked or whether it is a great modern poet describing in tranquillity the feelings which drove him to write his vision down. So T.S.Eliot said: *Some forms of ill health, debility or anaemia may produce an efflux of poetry in a way approaching the condition of automatic writing – though in contrast to the claims often made for automatic writing, the material has obviously been incubating within the poet for some time.*

You might call this *inspiration*. Typically the prophet is tormented with boils or sores or blinded by his vision. No wonder it is said of the prophets that they were not so much chosen as singled out. In the history of doctrine, what begins as an ecstatic outburst turns over time into the calm prose of the Creeds. *I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.* This, astonishing as it is, sounds almost routine when set beside all those visions of women clothed with the sun and angels with trumpets, or a city descending out of heaven like a bride.

So, if we avoid the St Giles Cripplegate view of apocalyptic writing as a metaphor for the banality global warming, what are we to make of it? We have to treat it as we treat any other words of Scripture: we take it on trust. Look at it like this: when the Gospel teaches us the truth about human nature, it has us bang to rights in every aspect. We are sinners, yet we have a longing to be something better. We are often faithless, but we can repent and be restored. We are frail, but we can pray for strength and be given it. Now ask yourself, is the Gospel which has got us and the world right in every respect suddenly going to go wrong, or start telling lies, when it speaks to us of the reality of the world to come? Of course not.

You need first summon up faith. It is *fides quaerens intellectum* – faith seeking understanding. Do you remember – this is St Augustine’s way? Faith is not something airy-fairy, groundless. It is to make certain absolute presuppositions. And once you have made those presuppositions, the content of faith begins to be made clear to you. The analogy is with geometry. You accept that a triangle is a plain figure bounded by three sides. You *must* accept that definition first, before you can go on to benefit from all the useful information about triangles given to us by Euclid and Pythagoras.

There was another programme on Radio Four in which a gaggle of sophisticates were discussing the interpretation of Scripture. Characteristically the tone was mocking. They especially ridiculed a few verses from St Paul’s Epistle to the Thessalonians – where the Apostle says: *Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air...*

There were limp jokes about aeroplanes and born-again pilots ripped out of the flight deck to leave all the unsaved package holidaymakers crashing to earth. Of course this got a lot of giggles from the smartypants around the BBC table. But pity them. They had only contracted a dose of the St Giles Cripplegate disease of galloping literal-mindedness. You will not be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. But the event will be so momentous that it will be something like being caught up into the air. It is described by St Paul in poetic, visionary language because it *cannot* be described literally – not even by St Paul.

So what will it be like at the end? There will be consciousness of sin – all those things we have *ill done and done to others’ harm which once we took for exercise of virtue*. But don’t worry about this – you will be aware of the intense prayers of the saints for the salvation of your soul. There will be the overwhelming reality of God’s presence. And the equally overwhelming realisation that you are forgiven and accepted. What more can we say? Only that this will be something like music and something like silence – because in your spiritual body you will be left with something like ears.

But you will not be handed a harp. You will not burn everlastingly in the flame that dieth not. But it will feel something like that for the unrepentant. You will not have to look out for chunks of falling masonry as the New Jerusalem comes out of the sky, or escape the beast that has eyes in his behind. Our Lord promised that in his house are many mansions. But don’t think of Dorney Wood and Clivedon. As I said, the rest of the Gospel is so accurate in what it says about us and the world that you can surely trust it when it speaks of the end of the world and the life to come.

Only we cannot capture the reality of that end and that world in exactly the terms we use in and for the here and now. But be assured by the words of Jesus to his ecstatic prophet St John the Divine on the island of Patmos:

*I Jesus have sent mine angel to testify unto you these things in the churches. And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely.*