

*Sermon, Sunday after Ascension, St Michael's 2004. The end of all things is at hand...*

In today's epistle, St Peter tells us *The end of all things is at hand*. However uncongenial we may find it, the fact remains that not only St Peter but Our Lord believed the prophecies in the Bible about the end of the world. Whether or not we have the sense of an ending, Jesus did. And he added to the prophecies some blindingly clear prophecies of his own, for example: *In those days after that tribulation the sun shall be darkened and the moon shall not give her light. And the stars of heaven shall fall...and then shall they see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and glory.*

Most of today's clergy – especially the bishops – don't like to be reminded of Our Lord's teaching about the end of the world. Instead, they are selective in what they will accept from the gospel. There is a fashionable zeal to take on board the Lord's sayings about our responsibilities towards the poor – though even this they interpret as a call to invent structures and political policies of a certain shade. Jesus' teaching about the end of the world and his second coming to judgement they dismiss as myth. But it is not for us to decide which of Our Master's words will do for us and which won't. I'm reminded of the bishop on *Thought for the Day* who began his spiel with the words *I want to talk about one of Jesus' very best parables* – which prompts us to reply *Oh so some of the others weren't so good then?*

Modern translations of the Bible play down the end and the judgement as if it were something which nice, progressive, liberal, clean and modern people like us needn't bother ourselves with. *The New English Bible* mangles St Peter's words about the end of the world like this: *My dear friends do not be bewildered by the fiery ordeal as if it were something extraordinary*. What, the last day not extraordinary! They make out that the end of the world itself will be no more remarkable than an exceptionally hot afternoon at Goodwood. But the Lord is clear: there will be an ending and there will be a judgement.

Dr Johnson was once sitting in the ale house with his friends and he became morose. He said *I'm afraid of the Lord's judgement on me*. One of the friends tried to cheer him up: *But scripture says Our Lord is merciful*. Johnson replied: *Scripture also says that Our Lord has said he will set some on his right hand and others on his left*.

Whatever we believe about the end of the world, the fact is that we shall all come to our own personal end. It's worth remembering that more than half of all the people in the world who profess any religion welcome this. The countless millions of Buddhists and Hindus welcome death as an escape from this unpleasant life in which the odds are stacked against us and where it is said *We play on a board untrue with a twisted cue and elliptical billiard balls*. These religions of renunciation look forward to death as a release from the cruel wheel of life in which, as Schopenhauer reminds us *Our existence itself is the crime*.

But the Christian faith will not allow us to escape judgement in this way. I recall the old *Monty Python* sketch in which Eric Idle brings the news that a famous accountant has just died and John Cleese replies *Oh, what did he mean by that – some sort of tax dodge?* In death we shall not avoid the ultimate taxing. We shall face judgement. Shakespeare cannot allow Hamlet to forget this. You remember Hamlet, like any good

disciple of *The Upanishads*, looks forward to death as a release: *To die: To sleep: No more. And, by a sleep to say we end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wished.* Then he thinks for a minute and says: *To sleep, perchance to dream: ay there's the rub. For in that sleep of death what dreams may come?*' Well we can tell the great Dane: they are the dreams of judgement.

It is judgement that is behind our fear of death. These fears will not go away – no not even in an atheistic century. Tom Stoppard puts it amusingly in his parody of *Hamlet* called *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead: Do you ever think of yourself as actually dead, lying in a box with the lid on?*

*No. I mean you'd never know you were in a box would you? It would be just like being asleep in a box. Not that I'd like to sleep in a box, mind you, not without any air. You'd wake up dead, for a start and then where would you be apart from inside a box...?*

Now I'm trying to cheer you up this morning. There is no escaping judgement, no escaping the end – but *the end* means something else and I shall come back to this. Christian faith has over the centuries developed a coherent teaching about what's to become of us. As St Paul promised, the last judgement means that we shall know even as we are known. This will come as a shock. All our doings and all the doings of those we have dealt with in this life will become known to us instantly. That's what scripture means when it says *In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed.* Every hidden motivation. Every excuse we've ever made. Every lie we've ever told. All shall stand revealed. *And last the rending pain of re-enactment of all that you have done and been; the shame of motives late revealed, and the awareness of things ill done and done to others' harm which once you took for exercise of virtue.* That is the judgement which so frightened Dr Johnson.

You can't enter the nearer presence of God in a shocked and shambolic state like that. So after judgement there will be purification. We may pray with T.S. Eliot that God will *purify our motive in the grounds of our beseeching.* This purification is called by the church both Purgatory and Paradise. Agony and ecstasy. Because our hearts shall be pierced by the recollection of our sins but, as we look up, we shall see on the dark hill the crucified Christ. And his blood *streaming in the firmament.*

*Then should the Pomander, which was before a speaking sweet, mend by reflection and tell me more; for pardon of my imperfection would warm and work it sweeter than before. For when my Master which alone is sweet, and even in my unworthiness 'pleasing' shall call me and meet me thy servant not displeasing; Thy call is but the breathing of the sweet.*

And, while we are in that state, in those other two places – earth and heaven – congregations of men and angels will be offering the sacrifice of the Eucharist for our salvation.

Then will come the true end. The end of a different kind of which I spoke earlier. It is end in the sense of our final purpose. What will it be like? Well *all things transitory are but as symbols sent. And now we see through a glass darkly.* It will be something

like this: *first seeing she who made human nature so noble that the Maker of it himself did not scorn to have himself made by it. She who is the midday blaze of love. In her there is mercy. In her there is pity. In her magnificence. In her whatever goodness there ever was in creatures.*

*At this point high imagination fails; for already our desires and our will are being turned like a wheel all at one pace; by the love which moves the sun and the other stars.*

*In my end is my beginning.*