

Christ Church, Brunswick
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Fr P L Burgess
Mark 13: 24-32

THE SECOND COMING.

“The sun shall be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light. And the stars of heaven shall fall and the powers that are in heaven shall be shaken. And then they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds with great power and glory. And then shall he send his angels, and shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from the uttermost part of the earth to the uttermost part of heaven.”

Well, that's some scenario isn't it - amazing!.
I have actually met people who take this literally and they have written me off because I have suggested another view.

I could be wrong, of course, so if you see a star landing in your backyard you'd better not go near it. It's probably hot after all that twinkling.

The twinkling stars in the sky is the language of little children, isn't it. And we have no hesitation in using it with them. We teach them a song about a twinkling star. (I was thinking about requesting it for our first hymn today but I'm not sure our organist and choir could handle it.

And why do we do this? It is because children can't understand the complexities of the nature of the universe. It is not their language.

There's a strong similarity with this, and what Jesus was doing with the Jews when He spoke of Christ coming in the clouds and the falling stars, and all the rest.

OK, but a child has a simple childish view of things. He or she has not yet acquired the knowledge to see things as we do.

The Jews were not childish. They were, in many respects, very clever people - mature and capable. Their problem was that everything that was true for them had to be supported by the teaching of the old prophets. If it wasn't in line with what the prophets had said it couldn't be true.

Again and again in the Gospel we find that the writers went to great pains to demonstrate that Jesus' life and teaching was the fulfilment of something the prophets foretold.

On Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, “you will find an ass tied and a colt, the foal of an ass. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say ‘the Lord has need of them and he will send them immediately.

This took place to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet saying 'Tell the daughter of Zion, behold your king is coming, humble and mounted on an ass and a colt, the foal of an ass.' "This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophets."

So what else did the prophets say?

Well, Moses said "The horns of the sun shall be broken and he shall be turned into darkness.

And the moon shall not give her light and be turned wholly into blood, and the circle of the stars will be disturbed."

Micah and Zacharia had similar images. And this is what the Jews were convinced would happen - literally. This was their language just as "Twinkle, twinkle little star" is a child's language.

Jesus had a message to convey, and how to do it, but to use their language. This He did but the message in all of this was that He would come again to judge the world.

Speaking to us today, Jesus would use different language because we don't rely on the prophets. So just as we abandon the image of little children, we can just disregard the imagery that is in today's Gospel.

The message, however, is still there. Christ will come again.

In most of our modern liturgies we proclaim what is called The Mystery of Faith: "Christ has died - Christ is risen - Christ will come again."

In the Creed this morning we sang: "And He shall come again with glory to judge both the quick" (or the living) "and the dead."

The second coming of the Saviour is very much a part of our faith.

"Christ will come again" suggests a gap or time between now and that event.

Matthew 24: 36-42 "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only."

And verse 42 "Watch therefore for you do not know on what day the Lord is coming." And later in verse 44 "Therefore you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

This makes a nonsense out of those people who think they can work out when the Lord is coming from the book of Revelation, and go and sit on Sydney Heads or somewhere waiting for it to happen. When it doesn't happen it's "Oh well, back to the drawing board."

Seeing they're so keen on the Bible, I really can't imagine why they can't see that it says, "No one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son but the Father only."

By convincing themselves that they know, they are putting themselves above the angels of heaven and the Son (the second person of the Trinity) - some arrogance wouldn't you say?

The only thing they managed to do is to scare the living daylights out of their children.

“Christ will come again.” As I said a moment ago this suggests a gap or time between now and that event. So what happens in that gap? Do we sleep - rest from this earthly journey?

The Roman doctrine of purgatory says that it is a time of purgation or cleansing. I suppose that makes sense because we really leave this earth quite unfit to face God. I like to see it as a bit more than purging.

I have always been impressed by our Lord's words in John 14: 2. I say impressed not because I don't quite believe everything Jesus said - far from it - but there is the question of interpretation. My little mind may not be right and their others who might see it differently.

Anyhow Jesus said: “In my father's house are many mansions” - or resting places. “If it were not so would I have told you I go to prepare a place for you.” Jesus, here, is likening Himself to a dragoman or scout who went ahead of a party of travellers and booked and prepared a camping place. These ‘mansions’ or resting places were designated spots at the various springs where travellers stopped for safety.

“I go before you to prepare a place for you”.

This suggests a journey. We can see life on this earth as a journey - learning all the time - falling into pot holes as we sin - growing wiser - understanding more. At the end of it who is ready to stand before God? No one I would suggest. We have further to go, more problems to resolve, more sins to purge, more to understand, more to experience and more to fix. What's more we need to have a greater vision of the Master.

The most beautiful thing - the most consoling thought is that we do not go through this alone. Jesus said: “When I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to myself that where I am, you may be also.”

I do believe firmly that when I die, the blessed loving Lord will greet me to take me on my journey. I look forward to that.

He has always lead me through this life, but the future is something else.

One thing I don't believe is that we will be immediately reunited with our forebears and our old mates who have beaten us to it.

We will not be saying; “Oh, hello mum and dad – and grandma; how are you these days” and give her a kiss.

I tell you what, it would be stretching it too far for me to give my grandma a kiss.

In the first place because I was made to do it when I was a kid, and it was awful. And secondly because my memory of her was a grumpy old tyrant who disapproved of all that we did, and who used to hit the dog with her walking stick. Mercifully I won't be confronted with that situation. Nor will I be saying, “Oh hello Fred, how've you been since your funeral last year?” or “Ah, Napoleon, I didn't expect to see you here.”

The Lord will be there to take me to the place He has prepared and I believe the journey will be far more exciting than the one I've just finished - that we unwittingly call "life."

I don't want to push further into this subject, because I'm likely to get tangled up. There is a great deal I don't know and I don't want to speculate too much.

We do believe in the second coming of Christ. Just when, and in what manner He will come, we don't know.

And the trumpet shall sound and the graves will be opened and we shall stand at the last day upon the earth is another case of the imagery that was used to give people of earlier times some notion of the great and final day when the Lord will come.

The simple logistics of that is quite unreal. What wouldn't occur to the promoters of that vision is that there are at any given time, a lot more dead people than live people around the Holy Land and indeed around the world.

The Lord's second coming is for judgement. Yes we do believe that we are judged for what we have done and what we are.

There are many references to it in our Lord's teaching, and we say week by week in the Creed that we believe He will come again to judge both the quick and the dead. People have had some fanciful ideas about this, from Michaelangelo's depiction of the Last Judgement, in the Sistine Chapel, to the rantings of some evangelical preachers who felt it was more important to put the fear of God into people and have them quaking in their boots, than it was to tell them of His love. At this point, Bishop Grant and the Vicar are thinking; "I bet he's going to launch into Studdart Kennedy's poem as he did last year." That's because they're more cynical about other people's sermons, than you nice people are.

Well, I'm not. After a great struggle resisting the temptation, I'm not going to. However, I've already got my point across, haven't I.

I don't know what the judgement is going to be like. I think I know what it will not be like. But ever since I was a young priest with more brains than I've got now, I've believed that my sins will be apparent by contrast. As I think I've said to you before, I had a white car one time - at least I thought it was white, until I took it up into the snow when I saw that it wasn't white at all, but a filthy looking putty colour. I feel that when I stand before the Son of God I will look much worse than that car.

And stand before Christ I will - Jesus said; "All judgement is given unto the Son."

When I stand before the Lord and think of all that has been wrong, I could feel "How can I put things right now - they've happened - it's too late - I've done my dash."

The sins of omission are the big worry - things I know I ought to have done, and through laziness or fear or a cranky mood, I have not done.

To quote the General Confession at Morning Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer: "We have left undone those things that we ought to have done and we have done those things that we ought not to have done, and there is no health in us." (Oh, the genius of that Prayer Book).

I said a moment ago, "I could feel - how can I put these things right now, it's surely too late".

I said "could" because I will find my reassurance in the knowledge that even if I can't, the Lord can - the Lord has already done that. We call it redemption.

Jesus has taken our sins away as He suffered and died on the Cross - even our sins of omission.

This is conditional of course on whether we embrace that Cross ourselves. We must love the Lord and try to follow Him.

There are many in the world who reject all this. They think pretty well of themselves; "I thank thee Lord that I am not as other men are," I give to this and I do that for other people. I've had people say to me "Well, I reckon I'm OK - better than a lot of other scum. I gave so much to the Children's Hospital etc. I've never done anyone any harm" - by which he probably means he hasn't murdered anybody or beaten his wife or is a paedophile - "I think I'm alright, I don't need religion - especially I don't need the Church - they're a lot of hypocrites that go there."

In other words, such a person entirely rejects redemption.

There's no doubt that there are many people that are rejected in our Lord's judgement. How often did He say: "They shall be cast into outer darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

The question that is there for us, is 'what do we do in this life to be accepted?' The answer is to love the Lord and follow Him with all of your ability for as long as you live.

One final thing: "Can I pray for the dead?"
I sincerely hope that someone prays for me.