

Advent 1 C 29th Nov 2009

The concept of Jesus' return to earth at the end of history is not only explicitly set forth in the Bible, but is also consistent with the overall vision of history that you find there. After all, creation is depicted from beginning to end as a purposeful endeavour. It was begun like a drama with a specific idea in mind. Creation did not just happen — which means there is a plot, a beginning, middle, and an ending to the drama of history. C. S. Lewis said that when the author appears on the stage, you know the play is over. This is how he understands the doctrine of the Second Coming of our Lord. It means that he who has begun a good work will bring it to the best conclusion of which he is capable. After all, no one has ever claimed that this planet earth was intended to exist forever. In what is called by scientists “the second law of thermodynamics,” it is clearly predicted that the energy supply of this planet will eventually come to an end, which means that a conclusion of life as we know it here is inevitable. The concept of the Second Coming merely affirms that such a conclusion will be purposeful. The drama of history is not going to just fizzle out or end in a whimper! It is going to come to the kind of climax that he who conceived the drama wants for it. To be born into this world is not to enter a process of utter chaos. There is a plot to it all, and for there to be a plot, there must be a fitting climax.

Secondly, we mortals have no way of knowing precisely when this event will take place. With the same forthrightness that Jesus predicted that he would come again to earth, he also said: “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, not the Son, but the Father only” (Matthew 24:36). Alongside this flat acknowledgment of ignorance are innumerable parables of Jesus that underline the note of uncertainty and challenge human beings to be eternally vigilant and prepared at all times. “Watch,” Jesus says again and again, “for you do not know what day your Lord is coming. The Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” Coupled with the definite certainty of Jesus' return is the clear uncertainty as to when this will take place.

In light of such obvious teaching, it really is amazing that arch conservative fundamentalists invest so much energy in speculating about “The End Times.” I have my own hunch at this point. Again and again in history, when events get unusually complex or threatening, the tendency has been to turn to millennial speculation out of a sense of total powerlessness. They feel that things are in such a mess that only the intervention of God himself is capable of undoing what has been done. Then, too, the role of passive dependency is always easier than a stance of responsible involvement. Who has not, like a little child, wanted to gather up all the broken things and take them to Daddy to fix? The impulse to let someone else come in and solve all our difficulties is very strong; in fact, it is the classic infantile reaction to any problem, and who can deny that speculating abstractly about the future is less demanding than trying to serve lovingly and sacrificially in the present?

Here, in my judgment, is one of the subtlest temptations that faces any Christian in any era: If we are not careful, we can get diverted here from what Christ has called us to do in this present age. This happened in Thessalonica not twenty years after Jesus died, and Saint Paul met the issue head on. Some of the people there got so caught up in expecting and predicting the imminent return of the Lord that they had ceased to do any work and degenerated into idle busybodies who prattled only about the future (2 Thessalonians 3:11). Paul rebuked this tendency to let an over-interest in “the last things” divert us from faithfulness to “the first things. Faithfulness in the present, not curiosity about the future — this is the call of Christ to us all.

We, are to put “first things first.” But what are the first things? To commit ourselves unreservedly to the Lordship of Christ — putting ourselves totally in his hand, receiving his love, and letting him teach us how to love the Lord our God with all our hearts and minds and souls and strength and how to love our neighbour and how to love ourselves. This is the great commandment according to Jesus. When we are willing to be fed by him and to join him in feeding others, then we are being faithful stewards.

This really is what we are to focus on in the present moment — letting ourselves be loved by God and letting that love flow through us to those who need it most. It occurred to me one day as I reflected on Jesus’ great parable of the final judgment, that in a sense, the Second Coming has already occurred. Not the Final Coming, mind you, but a Second Coming where Christ identifies himself with the last and the least of the human procession. Did he not say when they asked, “When did we see you hungry and thirsty and naked and in prison?” those awesome words: “In as much as you did it not to one of the least of these, my brethren, you did it not to me”? I repeat, in a sense Christ has returned already, and he is now exactly where he spent his life — among those who need him the most. To join him there and do what we can for these struggling brothers and sisters, this is our true calling as Christians, not to speculate about the future.

There is something to the doctrine of the Second Coming — something very crucial. It is part of a vision of reality that says that creation is not a meaningless accident, but a drama with a plot — with a beginning, middle, and an end. There is an author behind all of history and seeing him step out on the stage will signal the end of the play. But as to when this will happen, ah — that is in God’s hands alone. Not even the angels or the Son himself was in on that secret. It will come when you do not expect it, “like a thief in the night,” Jesus said. And what are we to do in the meantime? We are to let Christ feed us and then go out “to feed and tend others,” especially those who need it most. First things first, is what Jesus would say, and that involves being loved and loving in the present rather than speculating about the future.

There is an old story about a warrior who was struck one day by a poisonous arrow. This man happened to be a speculative sort of person, so as he lay on the ground he mused to himself: “I wonder what kind of wood this arrow is made of? What sort of birds, do you suppose, the feathers come from? I wonder what type of man shot this arrow — tall or short, dark or light.” His comrades, who saw his plight, could bear it no longer, but cried out in frustration: “For God’s sake, man! Stop speculating and pull out the arrow!” Need I say more?