

The Apocalypse

We all know the famous Chinese blessing ‘ May you live in interesting times’; a blessing that is a hidden curse. Well, we certainly do live in interesting times, and they are indeed not always very pleasant. We are troubled by a spate of domestic violence, by gang violence, by rapes and murders here in Australia. And in the wider world by horrific terrorist attacks seemingly taking place everywhere, by feuds between Protestants and Catholics or between Shiites and Sunnis.. Our once calm apparently benevolent society seems to be on the verge of breaking down.

We are losing faith in our traditional and stalwart institutions. Parliament is dysfunctional, the churches are slowly emptying, and then we have Donald Trump as the United States President and Pauline Hanson as a Senator on top of everything else. They may well be interesting times but not particularly enjoyable.

But I am basically an optimist; all this has happened before and we have survived, but perhaps we could do with little less interesting times.

Now in Jesus’s time life in Judea was also interesting. The Jews were a subject people to the hated Roman rule. There was little contact between the Romans and the Jews. The Jews violently objected to the Roman taxes; the Romans didn’t understand their religion or the sacred and national place of the Temple. Here were money-lenders and the usual rogues. The Sadducees and the Pharisees were always squabbling. By the time Luke was writing today’s gospel the Temple had been destroyed. The people were desperately waiting for some sort of change. Some thought of a

military revolution, others harked back to the prophets and especially Malachi from whom we heard this morning

“For behold, the day comes, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all the evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.”

They were indeed living in interesting times. Luke in today’s gospel paints the picture of what he sees as the final crisis of history as described by Malachi, the crisis that is known as the Apocalypse which in Greek really means the lifting of the veil, an uncovering, a revelation. The wars, earthquakes, famines and pestilence were all part of the standard description of what the Jews expected to happen during the Apocalypse or the Day of the Lord.

I cannot resist the temptation of telling you of the clergyman in Victorian times who wanted to preach against the prevalence of women wearing elaborated hair styles, but he couldn’t find a relevant text until he discovered a verse about the apocalypse in Matthew’s gospel “Let him who is on the house top not come down; and so he preached on the words ‘top knot’ fulminating against the current fashion.

But back to the apocalypse - the closing words of the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scripture - are again from the prophet Malachi from a few verses further on than today’s reading. ‘Lest I come and smite the land with a curse’. - a quotation very much in line with what we have been talking about. Compare this with the last words of the New Testament from the Book of Revelation ‘The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with

you all, Amen' What a contrast!

Malachi is looking towards the Day of the Lord but using the language of the apocalypse which we have been discussing and ending with a threat of a curse, while John the Divine gives us the promise of the grace. In the intervening few hundred years the threat of a curse has blossomed into the promise of a grace through the incarnation of our Lord. - a real turning point in the history of the human race.

But how do we fit into this programme? Sometimes we go to the theatre and see actors in a great drama like Hamlet. But we too are actors in the even greater drama of life. Most of us have only a very small part, perhaps only stage hands or programme sellers. But as Christians we believe that life is meaningful, that in the end it does add up to something significant and is not just 'a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing'

It's not easy sometimes to see the point of it all. Millions of people living and dying, nations and cities rising and then being destroyed , apparently little progress in morality or behaviour. Is it a great drama in which we are involved or is it a tale told by an idiot signifying nothing?

The Christian message is that at the heart of all this whole bewildering course of human history there is a plan, there is the mind of God working something out. In a text that the rabbis frequently used to assure the people that the Day of the Lord was imminent Malachi prophesied 'I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the great and terrible day of the Lord's coming. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers

to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers.’ This prophecy of the coming of the Lord was interpreted by the Jews to refer to John the Baptist who was asked ‘Are you Elijah returned?’ But it was Jesus who pronounced the coming of the kingdom of God and we Christians believe God is working out a plan for the Kingdom and the destiny of the human race. How do we know this? Only by faith and trust and the knowledge that God has sent the Holy Spirit to guide us. There is no conclusive proof, no rational sequence of reasoning that I can give you, but I can point to the faith of Abraham and Moses, of Mary and the Samaritan woman and millions of others. The faith in the knowledge that God sent his Son Jesus into the world to tell us of God’s plan. The faith that assures those who have put their faith in God the knowledge that the kingdom of God has already begun. We have the essential clues to the meaning of life.

Yes, we are actors in a great drama, not just a meaningless tale. But we have no script, no book of words. When you act in a play (as many of you will have done and so know only too well) you have a book of words written out with all the parts in it. Not only your part, but everyone else’s so that you know exactly what you and everyone should be saying and doing at any moment. You can, maybe with difficulty, learn your part by heart and you can learn the cues that tell you what to say or what to do next. There is usually no question of having to make it up as you go along. You know all the answers; and if you miss one you know where to look it up.

But our great drama has no script. God has not given us a easy book of words in which to look up all the answers. We have been sent the messenger of the Lord prophesied by Malachi. God has told us the aim,

object and end of the drama. We have been given the clue to the meaning of life, but God has not laid down in advance exactly what each of us actors should do. We have to work out our own responsibilities during the course of the drama. We have no precise book of words that would enable us to understand what is going on throughout the course of human history. No cues to tell us that this is where we should take some particular course of action

But what of the Bible you might ask? Is not this the words, the script for Christians? Certainly it is the book which provides the clues to the drama of life; it is the actor's guide and commentary, but it is not a script. Nor does it tell us what to do next in unambiguous terms like the script of a play. Some people try to use the Bible in this way as a book that provides us with the programme for dealing with the day to day problems of living in interesting times and sometimes the Pope, or another eminent figure, will use it as if he were the director of the play that is the drama of life. But the Bible is not meant to be used in this way. It is not meant to relieve us of the responsibility for our actions, for we ourselves are always responsible for them. God wants us to stand on our own feet and answer for ourselves not read or learn our lines from a script.

One of the many peculiar phenomena of the Anglican church is that we are less tempted than some others to imagine that we know all the answers, that we have the real authority, the one and only book of words. We have no Pope, no Calvin, whom we can quote as the decisive authority. Our faith in Christ is as strong and assured as any, but in some less important matters we differ among ourselves and do not know the answers for certain. Do not be too worried by this; with no script we are bound to

extemporise.

Yes, we do live in interesting times. Sometimes, as I say the Lord's prayer and come to the passage 'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us', I wonder what terrible sins have been committed against us. Most of us live our lives where we do not have any violent people seeking vengeance against us. Maybe someone annoyed us while we were driving our car by cutting in in front of us; maybe someone annoyed us with an unpleasant speech against us or an official was rude to us in a government office. These are really minor sins and we do not find it difficult to forgive them. But I believe that the sins against us which Jesus asks us to forgive are the sins against humanity itself. Can you easily forgive a car bomber in Iraq who kills 20 people? Can you forgive the terrorists who crashed the planes into the World Trade Centre? The great Wearie Dunlop did forgive the Japanese who were so horrific in the prison camps in Changi, an example to us all. I think these are the sorts of sins that Jesus meant when he asked us to pray that our sins be forgiven as we forgive those who sin against us.

But the Bible does give us the theme of the drama, the purpose of life. This is illustrated by the two quotations I gave at the beginning. The rather primitive rumblings of the actors in the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures; the speeches and actions of the patriarchs, the prophets and sometimes directly from God. But throughout the Hebrew Scriptures there was always the possibility of vengeance

'lest I come and smite the earth with a curse'
the last words of the Old Testament,

But then there is a complete change of direction with the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Life, the great drama, will never be the same again. The purpose is clear, but the responsibility is still ours to play out our part. The incarnation of Jesus drives the revelation of the New Testament where we learn at last that we can expect help in the acting out of the play. Now we have guidance not only in the words of Jesus but also in the Spirit which God sent us, the Comforter ,

And so we are led to the last words of this New Testament

‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen’