

There was a message on a church noticeboard some years ago, which was intended to get everyone who read it excited, and queuing up to get into the church on a Sunday. It said, 'We are a warm and friendly eschatological community. Come and join us.....while you still can.' I would hope every Christian knows what eschatology means but I acknowledge that it is not one that is often heard in sermons. On this penultimate Sunday of the Church year, eschatology has raised its head bigtime. From the Greek word 'eschaton,' it is all about things that are distant from us, in the future, and it usually refers to the last day, the end of the world, the final judgement.

It certainly makes life rather difficult for the preacher. There was a certain vicar who groaned to his wife, 'I just cannot understand eschatology!' His wife said, 'Never mind, dear, it's not the end of the world.' Well, she was right. Because the ancient biblical writings about the future are in fact commentaries on the present, the present in which they were written.

The first reading today was from Daniel. He is thought to be a Jewish sage living in Babylon during the Exile in the 6th century BC, and around whom many legends had grown. We all know about him being thrown into the lion's den and the fiery furnace, from which on both occasions he was released unharmed. The later chapters of the book that bears his name tell of an empire that will be divided after the death of its great king. This matches exactly the history of Alexander the Great and his successors.

By the time the book was written, around 165BC, the events it describes had already taken place. This was a book of encouragement for Jews as they shook off Greek rule in their homeland and gained a brief 80 years or so of independence until the Romans turned up to subjugate them once again.

Which leads us to the time of Jesus. Our Gospel today, was from the first few verses of Mark 13, a chapter that is often described as 'the little apocalypse.' Jesus was not predicting the end of the world, as many have been tempted to think. He was saying something about his own day. The Jews were rumbling with pent-up desire to revolt against the Romans. Eventually, in AD70, the emperor Vespasian ordered Roman standards or banners to be raised in the Jerusalem temple. The Jews, horrified at such sacrilege, revolted and ultimately, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. Forty years earlier Jesus

was saying that if his fellow Jews go on as they are, one day soon, not one stone of the temple will be left upon another. He was reading the signs of his own times. By the time the Gospel of Mark was written, the event had already taken place.

But right at the beginning of the Christian story there was an energy about the end of the world and the Lord's coming again to bring the righteous into a new age, a new world under the total reign of God. For most Christians this meant heaven, a life beyond this one. But as time wore on and the world and all its troubles remained, Christians came to reflect more deeply on what the coming of Jesus, his life, death and resurrection meant for them. We can detect a development of thought in the New Testament itself.

The question to be answered was, why would God send Jesus to undergo so much trouble and sacrifice, teaching and showing people how to live loving, compassionate, self-giving lives, if he was going to end it all in just a few years' time? The Gospel of John tells us that Christ came because God so loved the world. Therefore, this world and this life are good and precious and have a long-term purpose.

As a result of the coming of Jesus, the final age had indeed begun, and through the Holy Spirit, Christ remains with us to help us live through it. The final age will eventually reach fulfilment in God and in God's good time. But first, a radical re-creation of human life in this world must take place; a life in which humanity enters into a right relationship with its creator and enables us to live as God intended.

The great challenge for those of us who are Christians is that we are called to lead the way, to be living examples and signposts of the kingdom of God life as we promote and demonstrate in word and deed the values of love, peace, justice, compassion, and service, and oppose such things as greed, selfishness, prejudice, abuse, and hatred. We are to be shepherds, enablers, or, drawing on the language of our Gospel today, perhaps better to say we are to be midwives! Jesus says, 'When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, and other calamities, this is not the end.' All the bad news that confronts us represents the labour-pains. A new world is being born; it is taking a long time from our

perspective – it has already been like a pregnancy 2,000 years long. But what matters is that we co-operate with Jesus in bringing the new world to birth.

As we worship today, nourished by the bread and wine, the sacramental presence of Christ's life to strengthen us to continue his work in the world, let us grasp that we are part of a great movement of God's presence in this world, in history, called to grow more and more deeply into God's life as we journey on, so that we reflect and express the values and energies of the new world, the age which is to come. As we ponder this challenge, we will hopefully realise or remind ourselves that the Christian faith and life is indeed something to be excited about, and we should embrace it enthusiastically while we still can, even if it does not immediately lead to people queuing to get into church on a Sunday.