

Advent II

2 Peter 3:1-15

Objections to the Second Coming...

Queen Elizabeth the First, when she was faced with governing a deeply divided Church of England, and trying to unite it under one prayer book, is meant to have declared: 'I have no desire to make windows into men's souls.' No desire to make windows into men's souls. Even female monarchs in those days, of course, used non-inclusive language.

Her point was that as long as members of the Church behaved well, and got along with each other, and were content to go to the same services, use the same words, and the same actions, she would not insist on knowing precisely how, inside their minds, they interpreted those things. There would be no English Inquisition.

Elizabeth was very wise. However, sometimes I would *love* to have a window into your souls, to know what you really think of what gets said here. I find this especially so in Advent time, above all after sermons like I preached last week on the end of the world, and the second coming of Jesus. For those poor unfortunates that missed it, essentially I said that it really was going to happen. We don't know when, we don't know how, but a time is coming when there will be no more time, when the story of the world suddenly arrives at its beautiful, terrifying, joyful, just conclusion. When everything will be suddenly shot through with the presence of Jesus.

Now here's my confession. Even as I preached it, a large part of me was thinking, 'but this is just mad. This is bizarre. No-one can believe this.' Can we really, credibly think that 2021 might not happen? That's what I said, and I think what traditional Christian doctrine means. Not that it *definitely* won't come, not that we shouldn't *plan* for it and indeed for much more – but still, that it might not. Before the next three weeks are up, God might simply bring the curtain down.

Now I really struggle to believe that. I suspect that most of you do too. If I had a window into your souls, I think I'd discover some of you go quite a bit further and actively *don't* believe it. Think this is just one of those embarrassing bits of tradition which thankfully we've now outgrown.

If so, then you, like me, really needed to hear 2 Peter 3 this morning. And this was written – sadly, probably not by St. Peter himself apparently – this was written sometime in the late first or perhaps early second century. Our doubts and perplexities are, it seems, nothing new.

People will doubt, says Peter (as we'll call the writer, for convenience) – people will doubt because as far as they can see, the world just goes on and on and on. 'Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.' History just meanders on forever. This is, practically, exactly what most people think today. Sure, physicists tell us that in about six billion years the whole universe might all end in various different scenarios: the big freeze, the big crunch, the big rip. But six billion years is a very, very long time. Long enough to not worry about.

Practically, we have all the time in the world. Nothing is going to interrupt us, end us.

And Peter says that the fundamental problem with these people is they've forgotten that we are *created*. By the word of God – by divine purpose, by divine plan – the heavens and the earth were formed. We're here for a *reason*. The universe is not just a brute fact, a spectacular accident. It was *deliberately* made for something. It was intended. And so it does not just carry on aimlessly forever, but will, when the Creator's intent is accomplished, be deliberately ended.

Note, by the way, two things.

Number one, this point is really fundamental. This is not some minor piece of theology. The question of whether we are here by accident, or on purpose, is really the question of whether you believe in God or not. It is as fundamental as that. And if you believe in the Creator God, says Peter, then one would at least expect his creation to have a point, to reach its conclusion, its fulfilment, its end.

Number two, knowing modern physics or cosmology doesn't really change any of this. Science does a pretty good job – in this week of vaccines, let us shout with delight that science does a simply wonderful job – in describing how things work, and making them work better for us. It is fantastic at 'what', 'how', 'when' and 'where' questions. It has no grip at all on 'why' questions, or 'what for' questions. Science cannot tell you whether human beings have any point: it can neither confirm nor deny. That's not what it's for. And what it can't do for individuals, it can't do for the world. So don't think, for a moment, that you can't believe in the end of the world because Science. In its own arrogant way, that would be a deeply unscientific way of thinking.

Well, you might say, I sort of see all that, but nonetheless: why is God taking so long? I can see that maybe the Christian story needs there to be some kind of glorious ending, but, well, it's just not happening, is it? Every passing year makes the whole thing seem a bit more implausible. To which Peter gives the very sound advice, look, one day with the Lord is like a thousand years. Think of it this way. There are species of mayfly whose whole lifespan is done in 24 hours: from larvae to fly to death in less than a day. Well, imagine how *we*, with all our years, must seem to a mayfly: unbearably, unspeakably slow. Something similar is going on when you think God is being slow. You know not of what you speak. You have no comprehension of what time is to God. What is agonisingly slow to you, is but the blink of an eyelid to him.

And having made that point, Peter would then ask – why do you want him to come quickly anyway? *Think* what you're asking for. Are you actually ready for the end of all things? Are you ready for Jesus to suddenly be here, for everything about you – not just everyone else, not just the bad guys – everything about *you* to be lit up with his light? Are you ready, personally, to be shot through with the fire that judges and burns and transforms all things? Listen, says Peter, if God delays it is for your sake. He's patient with you. He does not want any to perish, but to come to repentance.

Not, please note, to come up to scratch. To an acceptable level of goodness or achievement. Yes, at the end of our passage, Peter speaks of being found without spot or blemish – but that just gives the game away. Which of us could possibly, no matter how long the divine patience, be spotless and without blemish? Not one wicked act, one resentment, one corruption, one moment of viciousness? It cannot be done, and if that is what is required on the last day, we are truly doomed.

But, the Bible says, there is one who is spotless and without blemish. There is one without any darkness at all, who loved the Lord his God and his neighbour as himself, with *all* his heart and soul and mind and strength. Jesus of Nazareth is the one pure and spotless. He is the only one who could stand in the day of judgement and bear the divine fire. And repentance means realising that the only way *you* will stand is by hiding inside him. By asking him, in the depth of your heart, to throw his rightness, his love, his holiness around you like a cloak. Indeed more than that, asking for what begins as a cloak to seep inside you and live within you. Asking for everything about Him to become you.

Left to ourselves, and faced with the demand for utter holiness, the honest among us know we will be burned up and destroyed. But this is the whole Gospel: we are not left to ourselves. When Jesus went onto his Cross, it meant that, no-one, absolutely no-one, was ever left to themselves. He went on that Cross to be with the most damned, the most desolate – to throw his life around them and make them like himself. He took what was theirs – punishment, shame, destruction – so he could pour into them everything that was His: life, light, grace. He pours it into them – into us – so that it becomes our deepest heart. He makes it so that when the fire comes, and the truth of everything is disclosed, what will be found in us is Him: the beautiful, immortal diamond of love.

The Lord is not slow, as some think of slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. Repentance means clinging to Christ. Asking for Him to surround you, permeate you, heal you. Ask for all that and you will not be denied. You will face the end of the world without fear, holy and righteous in his sight. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.