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Advent: The End and Endings

A few years ago, a photograph appeared in the 'Church Times' of a church notice board which announced: 'Advent: Jesus is coming.' Below it there was another sign: 'Police Notice. No waiting.'

At times Jesus seemed to have believed that he would return soon after his resurrection, as did Paul. In later parts of the New Testament, however, such expectations were modified. Yes, Jesus will come again, says Matthew 24, but only after the Gospel has been preached to all the nations. The first Christians quoted Malachi 4:1, which announces that the day is coming 'that shall burn like an oven, when the wicked will be punished. St Paul in 2 Thessalonians complained of having to deal with Christians so obsessed with the second coming that they had given up working. Paul tells them to get on with their ordinary lives instead. It is striking that Christians gripped by the original excitement about the second coming were now being told to get on with their day to day work.

The Bible does not conceive of history as cyclical, as Eastern religions do. Rather, for the Bible, history moves towards a goal. History has a meaning and a purpose. Evil and good will not forever co-exist. In the end there will be a great judgement, a great vindication of good, and God will reign. When Jesus came, then, early Christians saw him as the end, the goal, the meaning of it all.

History was going to end. The problem for the Church has always been that history *hasn't* ended. It was the imminent expectation of the end that gave Jesus and the early Christians their particular urgency and edge. The fact that Jesus has not returned has always been a great puzzle. You can't go on telling a child 'Your birthday is coming' in order to keep up their keen expectancy if their birthday never arrives. Down the centuries, various sects have arisen with the urgent message that 'Jesus is about to return'. The Jehovah's Witnesses, founded in 1870, proclaimed that Jesus would return invisibly in 1878. After 1878, their followers were told that in 1914 Jesus would return visibly and take the elect into God's

kingdom, but 1914 came and went and Jesus was nowhere to be seen. Some argued that he did return, but you could only see him if you had true faith. More recently, a sect in Uganda formed themselves around the idea that Jesus would return in 2000. They were devastated when he did not. The core members all committed suicide. On one railway line I used to travel someone had painted on his roof that Jesus would return on such and such a date. But I noticed that he kept changing the date as one prediction after another failed.

When adventism (as it is called) attracts such odd people, why do we keep on proclaiming in creed and acclamation in the Eucharist that Christ will come again? If history is meaningless and without purpose then belief in a Last Judgement is pointless. Does life have a meaning, a goal or a purpose? If so, then the belief in a last judgement and second coming expresses this. History doesn't simply continue on without anything being resolved. Rowan Williams wrote in *Tokens of Trust* (98): 'All we need to know about the Last Judgement is that it will happen and that we don't know when. So we have to live in a state of constant preparedness to encounter complete truth.' An earlier theologian, Edwyn Hoskyns, said in a sermon: 'The one fundamental moral problem, is what we should still possess if the whole of our world was destroyed tomorrow, and we stood naked before God.' (*Cambridge Sermons.*)

But although the time of the Last Judgement is unknown, we have many other less dramatic moments 'that act as 'the end of a chapter': leaving junior school, leaving the choir, leaving school altogether, or leaving university or college. I was always very conscious of it when I was doing this or that for the last time. A friend said I was a 'connoisseur of last occasions'. I don't know whether that will count for or against me at the Last Judgement. Even weddings are always tinged with an element of pain, with parents and children letting go of one another to marry someone else who now will come first. Retirement is another obvious end. If you've become totally identified with your role you can feel totally stripped of your identity – as I know from having run pre-retirement courses for clergy and their wives. The Methodist minister and historian Gordon Rupp said in a sermon: 'Life has its own ways of setting examinations for us. . . . Around our Sixty Plus we meet a whole group of them – growing older, meeting pain and illness, separation and bereavement, death. . . . We are here to acknowledge the mysterious wisdom of God who is for ever disturbing, interrupting, breaking the patterns of our human loves, so that every handshake, every wave of the hand, every departure is the reminder that we are strangers and pilgrims and have here no abiding city.' (*The Sixty Plus and Other Sermons.*)

There are times when the apocalyptic biblical images of the end suddenly make sense to us. A theological student in Cambridge was studying the book of Revelation in September 1939. It hadn't meant very much to him at first, but when war broke out, it immediately came to have deep meaning and relevance.

The most obvious end is death. Dennis Potter, the controversial playwright, gave an astonishing interview to Melvyn Bragg in March 1994, a few weeks before he died of cancer. The fact that he was very near his end was emphasised by the bottle of morphine from which he took swigs from time to time. His nearness to his end heightened all his senses:

In a perverse sort of way I'm almost serene, I can celebrate life. Below my window in Ross, for example the blossom is out in full. . . . And instead of saying 'Oh, that's nice blossom', looking at it through the window . . . it is the whitest, frothiest, blossomiest blossom that there ever could be . . . the nowness of everything is absolutely wondrous . . . the glory of it, if you like the comfort of it, the reassurance. . . . I see God in us or with us, if I see God at all, as shreds and particles and rumours, some knowledge that we have, some feeling why we sing and dance and act, why we paint, why we love, why we make art.

Dennis Potter, Without Walls, 5 April 1994

Reports like this from the end of the line carry conviction and hope for us as we reach our various smaller endings during life and, as we draw near to our own ends, our own deaths.