

Sermon 14th November 2015 – A New Heaven

As we look at our world we can often fall into despair at what we see around us. Just this weekend, we have witnessed more horrific attacks on innocent individuals, closer to home than we would like. Our hearts and prayers go out to all those affected by the terrorist attacks in France on Friday and other attacks around our world. Our Eucharistic sacrifices today are offered for the eternal salvation of all those killed.

Events such as these remind us that the world is ever changing and no sooner do we seem to be on a path to satisfaction and comfort, than the world around us lurches in another direction. For thousands of years people have been predicting “The end of the world as we know it”.

People have always thought the end of the world is nigh. There is, as the writer of Ecclesiastes says, ‘nothing new under the sun’. As the end of the first millennium approached people predicted the end of the world. There was general fear, panic and chaos throughout the Christian world – people were convinced that the end of the world was coming, and probably felt rather stupid and rather relieved when January 1st in the year 1000 finally arrived without any problem.

Exactly the same was true at the turn of the 2nd millennium. This time it was the secularists who predicted world-wide melt down. We were warned that transport would be thrown into chaos,

weapons would automatically offload and all money would be wiped from bank accounts as computers would be struck with a programming virus that would plunge the world into chaos eventually killing whole continents of people in its wake. At one minute past midnight on 1st January 2000 the street lamps still shone, the railways still functioned and everyone's money was right where they had left it the night before.

In A.D 67 the Romans, putting down a revolt of the Jewish people, tore down the Temple. People thought that the destruction of this iconic building, God's dwelling place among his people, marked the end of the world. Today's gospel reading predicts that event. A disciple speaks to Jesus about the large stones and building that make up the Temple. And Mark has Jesus replying: 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down'. – and so it was to be. For the millions of devout Jews living at the time, the huge change the Temple's destruction wrought in their lives must have felt like the end of the world.

This is of course only a natural response to change – especially such violent and destructive change. But we can also feel this way over other changes too, even changes that are, in the long run, for the best. Change scares us! Change feels like “The end of the world as we know it” and all we want more than anything else in the world is our old world back. Sometimes we would rather embrace a flawed past than an unknown future.

Why does this urge hit us so hard? Is it simple regret of missed opportunities? Of wasted time that could have been put to better use? A fear that there may not be much time left? Is it simply the fear of death, I wonder?

We live in a finite economy, and are deeply aware that eventually our worldly resources will run short, even our own lives. Events like those we saw in France on Friday only strike home this uncomfortable truth all the more. I guess the fear of death does this to us.

It may be the end of the world as we know it, and how else are we to respond?

Ladies and gentlemen, we have a elephant in the room. I am afraid that we are all going to die, sooner or later, and we might as well openly acknowledge the fact, as keep hiding from it. Sarah, my wife, is what some might call, erm.. shor... vertically challenged. When she is feeling especially sensitive, I like to reassure her by reminding her that we will all join her sooner or later. In the end, we will all become vertically challenged: as dead as a dodo, doornail, doorknob.

Some of you now feel slightly uneasy or shocked. That is because death is a taboo subject in our society. We don't like to talk about it, let alone acknowledge it. But this social norm is quite simply destructive.

But, if we can talk about it openly, we can overcome our fear of death and free ourselves from the negative impulses our fear creates in us.

In these weeks leading up to Advent, the Church turns its attention to 'The Second Coming' - where Jesus wraps up this world and ushers in the new age of the kingdom of God. Where we are all called to a New Heaven and New Earth, whilst the old heaven and old earth are washed away.

On the face of it this sounds like scary stuff. Do we want our world to change so? The apocalypse sounds so very tumultuous. It will bring so much change and challenge. We don't like the thought of change. And so, this New Heaven and New Earth can make us feel like we want to run away faster than a banshee in a jet pack!

But, let us think about what this might mean.

In this New Heaven and New Earth we will have no possessions and will all live in harmony with one another, sharing everything we have.

If we have no possessions, then we would have nothing to be greedy about, and so sharing would no longer feel like a transaction but the essence of spiritual connection between all parties. Imagine, never again having to argue or become resentful about who is most deserving of resources. There will be no rich or poor – everyone equal. Equally loved, equally

treated. A place where our first instinct is always to be kind, loving and compassionate. Never feeling unfairly treated. Never living in the fear of death.

This New Heaven and New Earth is closer than you think. It could be here tomorrow. If we could put away all malice, bitterness and self-interest. If we could share what we have and not get cross when others threaten our personal stockpiles of resources. If we could love each other with nothing but generosity, gentleness and kindness.

Imagine how the Middle East would look today if all parties held true to these ideals. Imagine how our entire world would look.

We live in a finite economy and our resources will run out, even our earthly lives. But God's economy is infinite, eternal, never-ending. There is no scarcity in what he offers, only cascades of grace pouring down like dewfall and penetrating our hearts like heavenly nectar. God's infinite economy of grace keeps going even beyond our earthly life and death, into our resurrection and into God's eternal kingdom.

Once we realise this, once it really sinks in, then it will transform our entire outlook, banishing resent and bitterness to the realms of inconsequence; and suddenly there seems no need for such traits because everything now looks too amazing, too attractive, too transformative to continue in our old ways. Our faith promises us a place in the New Heaven and the New Earth is ours to

grasp. This is what it means to live a life in the Resurrection. This is our hope and we can begin to live it today.

Amen.

R.T. Parker-McGee 2015