

When I was in my early teens, I went to a film evening hosted by our local branch of *Youth for Christ* and watched *A Thief in the Night* and *A Distant Thunder*. These were the first two of a series of 'end times' films that dealt with the second coming of the Christ, the rapture, and the great tribulation.

The rapture is a doctrine that is primarily popular in some North American churches, but is also found in some churches here. It is the belief that the return of the Christ will take the form of a rapture, in which believers will be taken up to heaven by Jesus, and this will be followed by a period of terrible persecution called the great tribulation, albeit with some dispute over the precise order in which everything is believed to be going to happen.

A Thief in the Night tells the story of Patty, who is presented as being a nominal Christian who has not fully committed herself to Jesus. One day, her husband and millions of other people suddenly disappear, and Patty realises this was the rapture she had heard about.

But as Patty is not a 'proper' Christian, she is left behind. A totalitarian regime is set up, and everyone is required to receive the mark of the beast on the back of their hand or on their forehead. Those who resist are rounded up and arrested. Patty tries to avoid the authorities, but is eventually captured. She escapes, but she is cornered and she falls from a high place, seemingly to her death, but she wakes up. It was all a nightmare. She turns on the radio, and to her horror, she listens to a news report of the rapture. Her nightmare has really only just begun.

At the beginning of *A Distant Thunder*, Patty is facing an as yet unrevealed fate for refusing to accept the mark. The film then traces the life of her and her friends during the great tribulation and their eventual capture, and it finishes with Patty having to choose between either accepting the mark, and with it eternal damnation, or suffering a gruesome death.

I was terrified by those films. I couldn't sleep properly for weeks afterwards. I would lie awake at night, worrying that, like Patty, I might not be a 'proper' Christian and that I would be left behind, and I was anxious that I might not have the courage to resist the mark when I found myself in her situation.

And while it was not the only reason, let alone the main one, seeing these films was a significant factor in me stopping going to Church while I was in my teens. I could follow a faith based on the God of love I had grown up believing in, but I could not subscribe to keeping followers in line through the strategic use of terror.

Twenty years later, after many misadventures in the wilderness, I found my way back to my faith. And I learned the concept of a rapture followed by a great tribulation is a relatively modern idea that was completely unknown to the early Church. This belief takes in part of St Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians (including the section from that letter we heard in this morning's Epistle reading), adds some of the fantastic events described in Revelation, throws in a few bits of the gospels, and mixes it all up with the apocalyptic second half of the book of Daniel. It first arose among American Puritans in the 1600s, and was emphasised by the Plymouth

Brethren about 200 years ago. But it did not really gain widespread popularity until the 1970s. And films like *A Thief in the Night* and *A Distant Thunder* were a major reason for this.

Now it may well be that the rapture is a deeply held belief of yours. If that is the case, it is not my intention today to tell you that you are wrong, or try to convince you are to change your beliefs. But I would like to invite you to accept there are other scenarios to consider.

Our Epistle reading, which I have already touched on, comes (of course) from St Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, which has been the subject of a sermon series in this church, of which this is the final instalment. It is widely believed to be one of the earliest (and most likely the very earliest) document that found its way into the Newer Testament. But that is not immediately obvious, because the letters of St Paul that found their way into the canon were ordered by size rather than by the chronology of their composition.

St Paul wrote, "...the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night".¹ 'Of course, I have already spoken of 'a thief in the night', as it is where the title of the film I mentioned earlier comes from, but an expression that would have been familiar to many at that time was 'day of the lord', which is described throughout the Older Testament as being the day when God would intervene in the affairs of the world.

St Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians was written at a time when the early Church believed the return of Jesus the Christ was imminent. And whenever we consider the meaning of scripture, it is vital that we consider the cultural and historical, when it was written, and whom it

was written for, rather than simply taking it at face value through today's eyes. Otherwise, we are not giving it the respect it commands.

The second coming of the Christ is arguably the hardest doctrine of the Church to understand, and it doesn't help when different passages of scripture that have very different contexts are jumbled together. We can't just mix them all up and see what we come up with.

And while St Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians does indeed tell of Jesus meeting with his people,² trying to amalgamate it with a great tribulation is just wrong. While there is indeed a great tribulation in the Book of Revelation, this almost certainly refers to the persecution suffered by the early Church at the hands of the Romans, and not to any future events.

But while early Christians may not have believed in the rapture as it is generally understood today, they did – as we have noted – believe in a coming revelation of the resurrected Christ. Belief in the resurrection of the dead had not traditionally been part of Jewish belief; the dead had been consigned to a place known as *Sheol*. Then, several centuries before Jesus, belief in resurrection of the dead began to emerge. So we can understand how some of his early followers would have believed that his resurrection signalled the end of the age in which they were living, and the beginning of a general resurrection of humankind.

But let us return to the present day. Today is Christ the King Sunday. This is a relatively recent addition to the liturgical calendar. It was first instituted in 1925 by Pope Pius XI, with the somewhat grandiose

title of 'The Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe'. And while it was initially only a Roman Catholic feast, it was soon adopted by other denominations of the Church.

Christ the King Sunday observes the coming reign of Christ. It is the complete antithesis of Jesus being mocked as the 'King of the Jews' prior to his crucifixion. And its occurrence on the last Sunday before Advent points toward the incarnation of God in the human form at Christmas. So today is an appropriate day on which to prayerfully reflect what on what it means to say the Christ will come again. In the words of the Memorial Acclamation, Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come in glory.

But, if, like I believe to the case, the Christ is not going manifest himself in the form of a rapture, then just how will he appear to the world? Well maybe he already has. And maybe those wonderful words from the Gospel according to St John, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us,"³ are just as relevant as they were at the first Christmas more than two thousand years ago.

In today's gospel reading (which just happens to be my undisputed favourite text from scripture) Jesus taught us that whenever we give food to the hungry or a drink to the thirsty, welcome a stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, or visit those in prison, we do this for him.⁴

We are all created in God's image and we don't need to look very far to see Jesus. As St. John Chrysostom is purported to have said, "If you do not find Christ in the beggar at the church door, neither will you find him in the chalice."⁵

While history was changed forever by the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus two thousand years ago, when we consider the state of the world today, it is clear that the God's involvement with the world is not yet over.

I believe it is our calling to work towards the realisation of God's reign of justice and peace here on earth. God may be transforming the world, but God is doing so through us.

Whenever we pray the Lord's Prayer, like we will be doing together shortly, we pray for the coming of God's kingdom, on earth as in heaven. And the realisation of God's reign of justice and peace makes far more sense to me as an end times scenario than any notion of a rapture to be followed by a great tribulation does.

Today, Christ the King Sunday, we celebrate that Jesus the Christ will indeed come in glory, and God's reign of justice and peace will finally come to fruition.

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¹ 1 Thessalonians 5:2

² 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

³ John 1:14a

⁴ Matthew 25:35-36

⁵ St John Chrysostom (attributed)