

27 November 2016

The last few weeks have seen some unexpected upheavals, both at home and abroad. It all started when the All Blacks lost to Ireland. I know the All Blacks' winning run had to end at some stage, and while I am glad the inevitable defeat was at the hands of the Irish, and not the Australians, the South Africans, or (heaven forbid) the French, whom they just happen to be playing this morning, I don't think anyone here saw it coming. Certainly not the hapless punter who bet \$100,000 at the TAB on the All Blacks to win.

Then, a couple of days later, a scenario that was considered so unlikely that it was part of a plot of an episode of *The Simpsons* more than sixteen years ago became reality, and Donald Trump was elected President of the USA. I am not going to say what I personally think of that, as it would require the use of un-sermon like language. But just when we were starting recover from realising some of the implications of Trump's election, we were given a huge shakeup by the 7.8 magnitude earthquake in North Canterbury nearly a fortnight ago and the several thousand aftershocks, then torrential rain, floods, and landslides that followed. So is it any wonder that someone in the media asked whether the locusts had arrived yet?

Coincidentally, these upheavals could almost slot quite nicely into our liturgical calendar. Today is the First Sunday of Advent. Advent is a time of preparation, when we look forward to remembering the coming of the Christ child at Christmas, much like Lent is a time of preparation for his resurrection at Easter. It is also a time when we wait expectantly for him to come again.

A traditional theme for the First Sunday of Advent is hope. But after listening to today's gospel reading, you could be forgiven for struggling to find any hope, and thinking today was the beginning of the end of the world. The text may have spoken of the coming of the Son of Man, as the Christ is called in the text, but it also spoke of various calamities that would ensue.

A doctrine that is primarily popular in some North American churches, but is also found in some churches here, 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 great tribulation, albeit with some dispute over the precise order in which everything is believed to be going to happen.

I am sure you will all be familiar with this. But it may surprise you to know that the idea of a rapture to be followed by a great tribulation was not believed in by the first Christians, but is in fact a relatively modern concept, which 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.

While early Christians may not have believed in the rapture as it is generally understood today, they did believe in a coming revelation of the resurrected Christ. And they believed this was imminent. Indeed, Jesus had clearly told his followers their generation would not pass away until all these things have taken place.¹ But their generation has long since passed away. And we are still waiting.

So does this mean Jesus got it completely wrong? No, it doesn't. The texts I have just referred to could be described as being apocalyptic. While 'apocalyptic' and 'apocalypse' are now popularly taken to refer to the end of the world as we know it, the original meaning is closer to uncovering, or revelation. Which is why the Book of Revelation is sometimes called the Apocalypse. And in the words of American Baptist minister Chuck Queen, "...apocalyptic language points to some kind of ultimate vindication and redemption that means life beyond this life."²

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*. But 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 back to the present day. If the Christ is not going to manifest himself in the form of a rapture, 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.

The chapter that follows today's gospel reading tells 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 the Christ.⁴

And 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 the Christ 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 is doing so through us. And 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.

Today’s gospel tells us to get ready for the return of the Christ. But we’d better hurry up. Because maybe he is already here.

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<http://theword.tk>

¹ Mark 13:30

² <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/unfundamentalistchristians/2015/11/must-christians-believe-in-a-second-coming/>

³ John 1:14a

⁴ Matthew 25:35-36

⁵ St John Chrysostom (attributed)