

The end of the world has not come yet - apparently - in spite of the predictions made by an American preacher recently. Harold Camping, an 89 year old minister, predicted that the world would end on May 21st 2011. He made a similar prediction in 1994, but that seems to have been forgotten. Rev Camping said that by the end of the day there would be no more non-believers alive on the earth. For the believers, according to this minister, there would be the Rapture – that is, believers would be taken, bodily and alive, directly into heaven. There were no clear criteria for who fell into which category. I say this as more than a light-hearted dig in his direction, for there are many verses in the Bible that acknowledge the difficulty of recognising who is a “sheep” and who is a “goat”.

The tragedy of this tale is that some families (mainly American) sold houses or spent their children’s funds for college fees on advertising and promoting this message. Such families are rightly now devastated and desperately (literally, without hope) trying to make sense of the non- appearance of the end of the world. The comedy of this tale is the utter ridiculousness (let’s call a space a spade) of such claims which seem to surface regularly, yet are never challenged. The irony is that most people (including many in the church) simply ignore the warnings of the end of the world. The language of apocalypse is easy to use, can readily harm the gullible, and bring the church into disrespect. What are we to make of this?

First, we should not worry too much, not least because so many of these ingredients featured from time to time in the early church (and are, indeed, recorded in the New Testament). Lunacy has a long pedigree. Jesus’ saying ‘Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom’ (Matthew 16.28) is and was a hard verse to understand. So, some Christians from the time of Jesus’ death until about 70AD lived in hope and anticipation of the (real & literal) second coming. Paul has to deal with this situation in his epistles. Though Paul himself expected Christ’s coming, he also taught that it was important how we live our lives now. Anticipation of the end can distract us and harm the quality of our living now. Indeed, after Paul’s death (around 65AD), the whole generation of church leaders, who had been present when Jesus said the above words, started dying out. Surely, the second coming was nigh? The context for all the Gospels contains the disappointment and puzzlement of Christ’s non-appearance, the wondering what to do next, and an increase in persecution by the Romans. These were difficult times.

Historically, apocalyptic language developed in a number of religions and cultures from around 200BC through to 300AD. Such imagery is used in the Old Testament (Daniel) and in the New (especially, Revelation). The context for this happening is often an Empire which is antagonistic or disrespectful of faith, and also which exerts enormous control. The latter is important, for it is often then that believers feel that there is nothing they can do to improve their situation. It is then easy to believe that no change is possible without massive, cataclysmic trauma - the sort that can be brought about by God alone. In such circumstances, a group of believers can readily withdraw into a pietist holy huddle, as separate as possible for the external environment which is felt to be hostile; they are desperate for change yet have given up hope they can achieve it.

Describing it like this, you will see that the apocalyptic understanding challenges a prophetic approach (in the proper original sense of the word). Prophecy is not primarily about predicting the future, but rather it is about giving it shape. The prophets draw on their knowledge of God and, with courage and hope, declare the sort of world that they believe God wants now to create. It is often said ‘Prophecy is about forth-telling not fore-telling’. And prophets, when faithful to their calling, always name both what they believe God wants

and what we can contribute to making this happen. True prophecy involves and motivates; apocalyptic visions frighten and anaesthetize.

And there is another distinction: the apocalyptic speaker is usually conservative; he (and it is usually a man) takes images from the past (often scripture) and declares that that is what will happen now. So the future becomes for him merely a repetition of what has already been stated. Whereas the prophet draws on the stories of the past to find courage to make something similar, but new, happen today. For example, Wilberforce and others (in England) and the slaves themselves in America drew on the Exodus story for strength in the movement to abolish slavery. They did not see Exodus as predicting what would happen in 18th century America or Europe; but they did say 'If God did that for the slaves in Egypt then, can't God do the same for us now?' There is something much more open textured about prophecy than there is about the words of those predicting the end of time.

What of Jesus himself? In technical terms, used today, Jesus is described as an eschatological prophet. This means that much of Jesus' teaching was about the "eschaton" (the Greek word for 'the last things'). Jesus does not predict – indeed, he specifically warns us against trying to second-guess God by seeking to know 'the times and seasons'. But Jesus does, in parable and teaching, describe clearly things about the end of time which are also relevant to now: this is how God will judge, this is how God forgives, this is how God builds the Kingdom, this is what you need to do while waiting and so on. On the one hand, Jesus' message is about radical change, the sort of change that only God can bring about, but which also involves us and our decisions. On the other hand, Jesus' message is that "NOW matters". The former is called 'future eschatology', the latter is called 'realised eschatology' (meaning the Kingdom is already here). I believe you cannot separate the two – and Jesus did not separate them either.

Nothing that might happen in the future should make us lead less worthy lives now. Nothing should disturb us from what God is calling us towards: the radical Kingdom of love and peace. I pity Harold Camping. But let's not be distracted by him too much.