

The Second Coming – the Climax of History

The other day I saw yet another sign that read, “The end is nigh”. Nothing else. A man walking through a plaza in one of our cities with a sign around his neck. People have been predicting the end of life as we know it for generations. The Black Death in Europe wiped out of a third of the population and caused people to believe history was over. A few weeks ago an asteroid passing within a million kilometres of earth made news headlines – would it knock earth off its axis and send us hurtling into space? Virulent new diseases cause entire communities to go into mild panic. Is the end nigh? Do we need to be worried? Are we all being manipulated by world leaders who want to keep others under their psychological control and use conspiracy theories to do so?

The climax of human history will not be a Third World War, an explosion of AIDS, a mutant virus or an out-of-control extremist regime gone totally mad with chemical, biological and ballistic missiles, taking out civilisation with it. The end of this stage of history will be the Second Coming of Christ. Every major event in the human story, up to that point will pale into insignificance compared with the breathtaking nature and unmistakable reality of the appearance of Jesus. The Bible says that every eye will see him.

There are some differences of interpretation in the church today as to the order in which these things will come to pass. Jesus said, “One will be taken and the other will be left”. Some will be prepared, others will be caught out and it will be too late. Whatever the sequence, the reality is that Christ will come again. It is important that we understand this bottom line, in order to be Biblical Christians.

Millions are deceived by false religions masquerading as Christianity. In a series of newspaper advertisements, one group confidently asserted that “The Christ is now here”. People are prepared to believe any story, follow any leader, if they appear to know the way. When the blind lead the blind society falls into a ditch.

We are only pilgrims

The New Testament church lived with one main thought in its theology and practice: the return of Christ. While some early Christians were mistaken in believing it would occur during their own lifetimes (obviously it didn't), they never wavered. Jesus had promised to return and we still hold that promise to be reliable – because He said it. New Testament Christians didn't greet one another with, “How's the weather been?”, or “Have you heard what so-and-so did to x?”, but “Maranatha”, an Aramaic word meaning “The Lord is at Hand”. Whatever else motivated them, they never lost sight of the fact that what mattered in the final analysis was God's Kingdom and the return of His Son.

The Bible says in the book of Hebrews (11:13; 13:14; cf 1 Peter 2:11) that we are “pilgrims” in this world. We are not to live as though planet Earth is our only abode. Everything around us is temporary. The world's oldest man died a few weeks ago in the USA, aged 113. More than “three score years and ten”, but

limited nonetheless. Life is short, and God has made us for eternity. Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20). What this means in practice is that we need to live life to the full (it is, after all, a gift from God) but put our priorities in order and not live solely for things that will have no value on that day.

The Second Coming throughout the Scriptures

The Bible contains literally hundreds of verses referring to the Second Coming of Christ (more than his first coming). From Enoch onwards, the Old Testament prophets predicted the end of the world and the return of Messiah. (Even if they didn't understand what they were writing about, the Holy Spirit supernaturally led them to predict the things they did. See 2 Peter 1:21). Ezekiel, Daniel, David, Zechariah, Malachi and others were persuaded that they wrote this way because God was instructing them to do so.

Jesus taught us to pray that His kingdom would come. To a certain extent, we experience this kingdom now, if Jesus is King in our lives. In part the promise is also futuristic. Lengthy passages in the Gospels discuss the manner and signs of his coming. When Jesus broke bread during his Last Supper with the disciples he commanded them to share communion until his return (1 Corinthians 11:26). He told them he was going to prepare a place for them. "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to myself, so that where I am there you will be also" (John 14:3). In his legal defence before the High Priest Caiaphas, on the eve of the crucifixion, Jesus spoke emphatically about returning with power. He said that he would be "sitting on the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of heaven". Those who were judging him at the time clearly understood that he was speaking about himself (Matthew 26:64-65). After rising from the dead, he told the disciples to be ready for his coming. The angels who appeared to the disciples on the mountain, in the wake of his ascension to the right hand of God, spoke confidently about his physical return to earth (Acts 1:11). He would come in the same manner as they had seen him go.

The apostles, including John, James, Peter, Jude and Paul, predicted that Jesus would come again. They made his return a foundation of their teaching. They discovered that death was no longer to be feared and that their enemies did not have the final say, because the power and glory would one day belong to Christ.

The Apostle Paul wrote at least two letters to the infant church at Thessalonica. The first one was written specifically to counter the assertions of some wandering teachers that Jesus had already come back. If he had, they had missed out and were living for God in vain. Paul wrote to tell them the return of Jesus had yet to occur and that, when it did, it would be physical, literal and unmistakable. By contrast, Peter predicted that mockers would come in the end times ridiculing the fact that the return of Christ had not come to pass, and making those who hoped for his return appear naive and gullible. The unbelief of some men and women does not cancel out God's truth.

The ongoing tragedy in the human story demands a climax. Living in the West as we do we are almost oblivious to the scale of tragedy around the world. The

Bible says the whole of creation has been “groaning” until now, because of the weight of sin and its consequences in the world. The Bible says the world as we know it is passing away and that there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Peter tells us that the earth will one day be consumed by fire (2 Peter 3:3-11). I’d like to think we were getting better, but I’ve seen too much with my own eyes to believe man can do it by himself. I don’t believe in the Utopian zeal that pretends we are all gradually getting better.

If God is in overall control, and if He is truly a God of love, he must surely come and save us before we destroy ourselves. What we need is not better medicine, improved social and economic conditions, disarmament, an end to fighting in Iraq and a dozen other conflicts, better responses to genocide, suicide bombers and fundamentalists. What we need is Jesus. “When you see the signs, remember”, Jesus counsels us. I want to talk about those signs elsewhere.

The manner of his coming

How will Jesus come again? The first time he surprised almost everyone by entering the human race as a baby, the son of peasants, instead of being related to nobility, as they hoped Messiah would. By contrast, the Scripture is detailed in its description about how Jesus will come again. Whatever the sequence ends up being, we are taught that He will return physically and literally (read Job 19:25 and 1 Thessalonians 4:14-18).

Jesus will come unexpectedly (1 Thessalonians 5:2), like a thief in the night. The houses of two friends were recently burgled. Before they realised it, the thieves had broken in, gone through all their things and taken many valuable items. What surprised them was the speed with which the thieves worked. Likewise, Jesus will be on the scene before we realise it. He will come to judge the world. We have to be prepared.

Paul told an audience in Athens that God calls people everywhere to repent, to turn away from sin, because Jesus is coming to judge the world (Acts 17:30-31). Peter tells us that God is merciful. He does not want anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9). That’s why Christ died on the cross. That’s why the Holy Spirit convinces people of sin and their inability to set things right in their own strength and leads them to the source of forgiveness and power to live. That’s why we preach the Gospel the way we do, appealing to peoples’ hearts and the urgency of getting their lives in order before with God. Every knee will bow before him. Every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord (Philippians 2:10- 11). I sometimes hear people saying that, if God exists, he should come back and fix up the world. He will do so.

What is the purpose of his coming?

In this “virtual” age, why is it necessary that Jesus come again physically? Why can’t he simply manage everything by remote control?

For a start, he is coming for His people, the world-wide community of Christian believers. I was recently asked by an official, "What is your hope". To which I replied, "The return of Christ". We will have new bodies; the dead will be raised (cf Philippians 3:21; 1 Corinthians 15:51, 52). God will wipe away every tear. He will be in total control. No hope is greater than this. On a practical level, it means that we look at the way we are living and change aspects of our lifestyles and life choices that are at odds with God's purpose. John says that if anyone has this hope he or she "purifies themselves" (1 John 3:3). We are confronted with the challenge to re-order our lives in line with what is really important, what has eternal value (Colossians 3:2). Jesus says that the wise person builds up treasures in heaven, where they can't be touched (Matthew 6:19-21). Whatever we do here is of limited intrinsic value.

For Christians, the return of Christ is our greatest hope (1 Thessalonians 4:18). We echo believers down through the ages, "Come, Lord Jesus". We know this world is only a temporary home; that we have been created to live for eternity; and that our future lies in God's plan. Death loses its sting, the grave loses its victory where the promise of resurrection and eternal life are ours in Christ.

Second, he is coming to judge the world. The first time Jesus came as a Saviour; next time it will be to judge unbelievers. At present, John tells us, the whole world lies under the control of the devil (1 John 5:19). When Jesus comes again he will reassert God's control in the world. The lives of those who rejected him will be opened for inspection and judgement according to his standards. Make no mistake, we will all give an account of ourselves to God (Romans 15:12; Revelation 20:12-15). Only those who have trusted in Christ have an assurance their sins are forgiven and that they will escape eternal judgement (John 5:24-29). Amos warns us to "prepare to meet God" (Amos 4:12). This is not a question of "fear tactics", but a reality that will involve every one of us sooner or later.

Are you ready to meet him?