Apocalyptic Now. Corpus 5 November 2017

When I first visited Jerusalem, I was overwhelmed by a sense of the Bible coming to life; my childhood picture of the Holy Land as a kind of Narnia was suddenly deconstructed, but what I felt most was a strangely pressing need to identify the ground on which Jesus might actually have trod. As a result of two thousand years of rebuilding and shifting of rubble, most of the present old city is 20ft above the levels of the city of Jesus’ Day. But the Pool of Bethesda, excavated deep amongst later buildings, the path from Gethsemane to Caiaphas’ House, and the Roman pavement under the Ecce Homo convent are all places that evoke the spirit of the historical Jesus. What motivates the impulse to make this connection, as if to touch the hand of fame, or, as you might say in a biblical metaphor, to touch the hem of his garment? Is it to do with authenticity and de-mythologizing, and to do with the assurance of what we sometimes call historical fact? The same applies, for me at least, to the New Testament text. I’d like to know what Jesus *actually* said and what he *actually* believed and to be able to distinguish that from what his interpreters, both in the New Testament and in Christian theology, *say* he said and believed. So, for example there’s a vast gap between the stylised speeches John puts into Jesus’ mouth and the stories or parables he seems to have told and the one-liners about the sabbath being made for man and a camel getting through the eye of a needle, (or not getting through the eye of a needle), or the Aramaic exclamations that accompany two healings: ‘Talitha cumi’ (maiden arise), when he raises Jairus’ daughter, and ‘Ephphatha’ (be opened), when he heals a deaf man by sticking his fingers in his ears.

In today’s reading we’re presented with what he might or might not have said about the apocalypse – God’s bringing an end to the known world order and establishing a new kingdom: whether the Kingdom of God is future, imminent in the lifetime of Jesus’ disciples, or a present reality. Trying to uncover a historical Jesus wrapped up in gospel texts that were written between 35 and 70 years after his death, and therefore full of interpretation, propaganda, gloss and false memory, is generally regarded as a fool’s game, but serious attempts have been made quite recently and the question of Jesus eschatological belief or apocalyptic belief – what he believed about the end of the world – has been one of the key points of debate.

Even if we don’t notice it, we underline the point every time we say the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven’, but what kind of kingdom?

A group, largely comprising American scholars, calling themselves ‘The Jesus seminar’, has done extensive work on trying to identify the character and beliefs of the historical Jesus and their conclusion has been to emphasise what we call ‘realised’ eschatology i.e. that Jesus thought God’s Kingdom is present now, offering an alternative, ethically radical, way of living based on personal transformation. Such an emphasis naturally seems to segue into a kingdom of revolutionary social action that will transform the world – a political revolution based on the sermon given by Jesus in Nazareth on the text from Isaiah, ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.’ (I think this interpretation is much more influential than we realise; surely the motivation behind ‘liberation theology’, but also behind Christian action generally, whether it’s night shelters, children’s homes, education, or Christian Aid).

Other scholars like E.P. Sanders, Tom Wright and Geza Vermes (all of whom taught in Oxford at one point) go for apocalyptic emphasis – i.e. Jesus thought the end of the world order as a cosmic event, just round the corner, when the reign of God would begin. It’s what St Paul goes for, too, in his early writing, particularly to the Thessalonians.

His first letter to the Thessalonians chapter 4. 13-17, which is one of the earliest Christian documents dating from about 50CE, addresses the question. Basically, he’s saying the end will come in their lifetime, but the living will not have preference over the dead. ‘We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died… For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died. For this we declare to you…that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever.’

Of course, we know it didn’t happen. So, if Jesus believed in an immanent end, he was wrong. Is this a problem for his credibility? I don’t see why; any more than it is for Paul’s. Paul readjusted his thinking and set about developing a church for the long term. Two of the scholars I’ve mentioned see Jesus as a man of his time, defined by his Jewish upbringing in the independent province of Galilee, ruled by Herod Antipas, away from any significant Roman influence, and in all likelihood isolated linguistically from the influence of Greek culture. He didn’t claim to know all things. He claimed an extra special relationship with God for sure, but, especially in the synoptic gospels, didn’t claim to be God or the Son of God, but probably referred to himself as the son of man – a term which made no extraordinary claim. He was prayerful, ascetic, a healer and a prophet of the end times.

What does (or can) the New Testament apocalyptic message mean today? Some conservative Christians, particularly in America, take Paul’s description in Thessalonians literally, call it the Rapture, and believe it will happen to them. There is some evidence that climate change denial in USA is fired by this belief – because if the end’s just round the corner what does the environment matter anyway?

Maybe we think of the film *Apocalypse Now* and others of that genre. What with North Korea, Trump and the nuclear threat, global warming, pollution of the seas, Brexit, genocide, migration crises and random, unpredictable terrorism, the times feel *apocalyptic*. But, generally, that kind of apocalyptic spin is negative. It seems to say all good things are coming to an end. The party’s over. And it’s countered, not by an other-worldly intervention in Jesus’ sense, but by an other-worldly scenario involving the colonisation of other planets to escape the mayhem on earth, because earth has become too small or too polluted to sustain the human population explosion and the greedy fight for survival that goes with it. And in a curious psychological way we kind of accept that the party can’t last because we know our star, and the planetary system it sustains will eventually die – albeit not for several billion years. But the psychology is there saying this has to end sometime.

Matthew talks about rumours of wars, nation rising against nation, and earthquakes, and you could think he had a film script in mind, but there’s another more symbolic, metaphorical meaning I would want to draw out of it. The eschatological view which looks forward to the culmination of history implies a positive goal or purpose to life. And increasingly I find this is what religion has to offer. People ask the question, ‘What is the purpose of my life? What’s it all about? Why am I here? What does it all add up to in the end? (Philip Pullman adds to these questions: ???? and what shall I do?) And I think it’s not irreligious to say Christianity is about the meaning of life. In St Hilda’s I find it difficult to get people to come to chapel (it’s no more than a room, we don’t have Sunday services, it’s not big enough for choral evensong, has no organ) but when I held a discussion last week on ‘God and the meanings of life’, twenty-five turned up. God gives shape and value to a human life and it makes a lot of sense to suggest that in the end God will bring the experience of being to perfection.

The final point about New Testament apocalyptic teaching is that it’s about the judgement of God, which traditionally Jesus speaks of in the agricultural imagery such as the separation of sheep from goats and wheat from tares (or weeds). It’s about doing the right thing, reflecting on what is right and just and true. You might say a metaphor for political, and moral, and compassionate idealism. For us, maybe, it’s a call for self-examination, re-evaluation, repentance, change of direction, reassessment of priorities. Socrates said that an unexamined life is not worth living and I fancy, if he had had the vocabulary, Jesus might have said the same. Because we emphasise individualism so strongly we seem to fall short on self-examination. I have my rights, I have my space, you shouldn’t criticise me etc. And since I’m trading famous bon mots, I might as well add another, the Delphic *gnothi seauton*, know thyself. The apocalyptic teaching addresses this wisdom both to the individual and to society; it’s both personal and corporate in its reach, and the contemporary world would do well to take heed. A bit of genuine self-reflection in parliament wouldn’t go amiss, for example. A modicum of willingness to admit to mistakes.

On the radio this morning our previous bishop, Lord Harris, was arguing that since both the Commons and the Lords begin their day with prayers, which are surprisingly well attended, we might say that parliament is ultimately answerable to God. Not many people are going to buy into that, but to recognise higher authority, to think there is something, someone greater than you, to have a sense of awe and to get your ego into perspective is a very big step on the way.

Matthew 24.1-14

As Jesus came out of the temple and was going away, his disciples came to point out to him the buildings of the temple. Then he asked them, ‘You see all these, do you not? Truly I tell you, not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’

Signs of the End of the Age

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him privately, saying, ‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?’ Jesus answered them, ‘Beware that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, “I am the Messiah!” and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

Persecutions Foretold

‘Then they will hand you over to be tortured and will put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of my name. Then many will fall away, and they will betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because of the increase of lawlessness, the love of many will grow cold. But anyone who endures to the end will be saved. And this good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the world, as a testimony to all the nations; and then the end will come.

This is synoptic emphasis on ends times and coming kingdom on earth – contrast with John who doesn’t mention end times, but emphasises glory and joy in heaven – in my father’s house are many mansions