

where are things going?

a sermon preached on the
twenty-sixth sunday after pentecost

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at

st john's
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL
by fr david moore, vicar

the lections: Malachi 4:1-2, Psalm 98, 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13, Luke 21:5-19

“Teacher, when will this be, and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?”¹

An essential aspect of our humanity is the capacity *to reflect* on what’s happening around us; and to ponder both its meaning, as well as its *trajectory*, its direction.

On this final ‘Sunday after Pentecost’ our attention is directed in particular to the spiritual question of *trajectory*. Shocking political events this week further concentrate our minds on this question: *where are things going?*

It’s not surprising that Jesus’ followers found themselves pondering what was the meaning of his astonishing teachings and actions; and *where it was all leading*. Nor is it surprising that they were prone, as we are – and as people always have been² – to getting the wrong end of the stick with regards to the trajectory. “Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and, ‘The time is near!’ Do not go after them. When you hear of wars and insurrections, do not be terrified; for these things must take place first, but the end will not follow immediately.”³ Like us, they too were prone to being both impressed by spectacle; and overwhelmed by tumult, confusion, and upheaval.

The Lukan narrative – and the liturgical year – have brought us to the consequences of a ‘face set towards Jerusalem’,⁴ a willingness to undergo the way of self-emptying love, the state-sanctioned murder of the one who goes this way, a glimpse of things the ancestors longed to see.⁵

It is generally reckoned that Luke’s narrative is addressed to people who have witnessed the most shocking “signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves”.⁶ They have endured the destruction of temple and desolation of Jerusalem.⁷ What can all this mean; and, crucially, *where is it all leading?*

We, too, know these questions, even if most of us do not endure calamity on the scale of city-destruction. We go to great lengths trying to make our lives predictable, safe, secure. It is all-too-obvious, however, that our equanimity can be so readily disturbed even by trivial things; let alone signs and portents, earthquakes, insurrections, wars, famines, plagues, and shocking election events.

All this invites us to reflect on the spiritual question of *trajectory*. If that sounds a bit esoteric, then try asking yourself this very practical question: What is the *purpose* of my life of prayer, my Bible reading, my spiritual practices, and my ethical action? What is the *direction* in which I hope it will lead? I venture to suggest that the perception of Christians is that we do it all for the sake of an eternal reward, in a timeless and perfect ‘heaven’?

Though the biblical narrative of all three Abrahamic faiths is grounded in a theology of an *unfolding* – an opening out, an ‘up ahead’, a calling of God’s future, a horizon of expectation that God is *still creating* – our tradition has been somewhat hijacked by Greek philosophical categories of timeless perfection. Thus influenced, the doctrines of creation, fall, and redemption have tended to spawn a static metaphysics, in which the quest for God is directed

¹ Luke 21:7

² Malachi 4:1

³ Luke 21:8-9

⁴ Luke 9:51

⁵ Luke 10:23-24

⁶ Luke 21:25

⁷ Luke 21:6,20

towards an imagined lost original perfection.⁸ We have taught countless generations that the human task is to be rescued from ‘this fallen world’s sinfulness’, in order to be restored to timeless perfection. The focus of piety, prayer and ethical life tends, therefore, to be oriented *vertically*, to ‘Eden’. Rescue religion looks up.

I am convinced that this vertical trajectory is *not* biblical. Abrahamic faith is forward-looking, not upward looking. The God of the future is always beckoning, drawing us away from our homeland, towards that which cannot yet be seen – to “a *parousia*... not so much a perfect presence as a transforming *adventus*,”⁹ a coming! As we have been hearing through these Sundays after Pentecost, Jesus the wisdom teacher has been inviting his followers into this future which is not only unseen, but which is in fact the way of shocking and dramatic reversals. The spectacles and the calamities which tend to ‘titillate the masses’ are *not* signs of the kingdom: do not go after them!

Later, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews would express the insight that faith is hope for that which is as yet unseen.¹⁰ And St Paul would leave us with the memorable image of seeing through a mirror dimly;¹¹ the fullness of the vision of God’s future yet to be revealed.

In all this, we are invited to gaze not so much up, as *ahead*, not merely in order to see *more*, but to *become* more. Our very life is a becoming!

Yet, Christian theology and teaching remains largely stuck in a static-state vertical gaze; frightened of, and reactive to, the unfolding future. So much so that it has seemed to many good people that Christians have no real interest in the future of life on earth, so preoccupied are we with our apocalyptic scenarios, and our hoped-for escape-hatch vertical rescue to a timeless, perfect heaven.

This has led us into a disastrous dead end. I am convinced that this is *the* mission crisis of our time. Our official teachings remain embedded in a concrete-literal static three-decker cosmos; an upward gaze which denies not only Abrahamic faith, but also the facts of our unfolding, evolving cosmos. I agree with Teilhard de Chardin; that we must ‘change the geometry’ of our doctrines so as to be coherent in an expanding and evolutionary universe.¹²

It’s *doctrinal* revolution that we need right now. All else, it seems to me, is mere tinkering with deck chairs on the Titanic.

A humankind in evolution – as part of the entire universe in evolution – will always be confronted by upheaval, by signs and portents. We are, after all, creation itself, continuing. So yes, we will “faint and fear from foreboding of what is coming upon the world”,¹³ these conditions necessary for the evolution of consciousness.

But, our teacher speaks into our fearful hearts: ‘Do not be led astray’. “Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near”.¹⁴

For the same Spirit who overshadowed the waters of chaos¹⁵ – as well as over his teenage mother,¹⁶ and the waters of the Jordan,¹⁷ the mount of transfiguration,¹⁸ and the dying crucified¹⁹ – has always been calling us forward into the unknown – the as-yet unseen, indeed unimagined future – is still beckoning. Her creativity may well be resisted; but she cannot be thwarted!

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⁸ John F Haught, **Resting on the Future: Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe**, London: Bloomsbury, 2015, p1.

⁹ John F Haught, p14.

¹⁰ Hebrews 11:1

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 13:12

¹² Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, ‘The Christic’, in **The Heart of Matter**, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978 p97.

¹³ Luke 21:26

¹⁴ Luke 21:28

¹⁵ Genesis 1:1

¹⁶ Luke 1:35

¹⁷ Luke 3:22

¹⁸ Luke 9:34

¹⁹ Luke 23:44-46