

THE REALITY OF THE RETURN OF THE LORD - AND HIS JUDGEMENT

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We say this Sunday by Sunday, and I often wonder whether we feel that this is just some sort of mumbo jumbo put together by the early church fathers which we feel we have to keep in for traditional and historical reasons.

I have said before that I don't think like that. I think that it is true and that Jesus will return.

Why do I say that? Well mainly because Jesus said so. In our Gospel, for example we have: "Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven"

The night before His crucifixion, Jesus told His apostles that He would return (John 14:3). When Jesus ascended into heaven, two angels appeared to His followers, saying that He would return in the same manner as they had seen Him go (Acts 1:11)

In fact, in the whole of the New Testament refers to the return of Jesus more than 300 times. It was a key piece which completed the jigsaw of Jesus. The pieces were: The Incarnation, The Life and teaching, Last Supper, Arrest and trial and crucifixion, the resurrection and the subsequent appearances, and the ascension. If you stop there, a piece is missing, and it is the parousia, the Second Coming - the Return of Jesus.

So, let's accept that it is a fact. The reason that so many Christian people have difficulty with it, is that it has been 2,000 years. If it hasn't happened by now, when will it happen, for goodness sake.

I was in out patients recently, waiting to see the surgeon. The visit was a big

deal. As you know, I have a spinal problem and this visit was to see if everything could be put right some how, so that the constant pain could go away. I arrived some time before the given time - Army training. I sat in the waiting area. I read the paper. I grabbed a magazine. The time was well past. There were people in white coats, wandering about, and life was going on, as it does in the Freeman - all bustle, and beds going to X ray and so on. It was an hour past the time. I got very restive. Have they overlooked me? Is he actually *in* today at all? An hour and a quarter. I could stand it no longer. I went to the desk. Was I still to be seen or had something happened? Yes, I was to be seen, but we are running late. Go and sit again. I tried to be patient.

The early Christian church longed for Jesus to come back - to sort everything out as he promised. To take away all the pain of persecution.

Yet he didn't come. People began asking questions - some folk had actually died, and yet Jesus had said to them - earlier on, in Mark 9 " Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power."

Had they misunderstood Him? Was it all somehow not true? This was a vital question. Christians were suffering and dying for the faith now. If the vital piece of the jigsaw wasn't true, then what about the rest? Clearly some of them had asked Paul about it, with some urgency.

Paul replies to the Christian community in Corinth: If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

To the church at Thessalonika he writes: But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. 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 by the word of the Lord, 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 forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.

Paul is in no doubt at all. The church really could take encouragement and draw strength from his words.

So, it is real, it will happen, we have to be patient.

But *what* will happen? John in Revelation writes:

Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the book of life. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done.

When he was with us Jesus, said that he didn't judge people now. We have the story of the woman caught in adultery to show that Jesus was not all condemnation. He gave second chances, but Jesus does talk about final judgement in many parables: remember the great sorting out of the good wheat from the weeds at the harvest?

Listen to him here, speaking more plainly: "I came to cast fire upon the earth. And what do I wish? Would that it were already kindled! There is an experience through which I must pass; and now I am under tension until it is accomplished! Do you think I came to give peace in the earth? Not that, I tell you, but division! From now on in one house there will be five people divided - three against two, and two against three. They will be divided, father against son, and son against father, mother against daughter, and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against

her mother-in-law.”

Fire to the Jews was the symbol of judgement.

I have no clear idea of how the judgement will happen - all I am convinced about is that it will. I do not have time now to think about the penalty for rejecting God. There are so many conflicting and frankly weird images in the Bible. Nevertheless, I do know that Jesus promised that he would speak for us when that time of judgement comes.

“Your faith has saved you.” “Your faith has made you whole.” For our Lord, faith in God and belief in Jesus, his son, the living Word, was what was important. And he said to the disciples, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.”

So the return of the Lord is a matter of vital importance, eternal importance to us. It **will** happen. We just need to be patient. Whether or not it happens in our lifetime does not matter. The surgeon eventually saw me - what transpires may be another story. But the Lord will come and there will be an accounting.

So we have the time of Advent to think about the return of Jesus and the implications for us in eternity. It is fine to have a lovely, fuzzy view of faith in the future - heaven and all that. But there will be an accounting, and we shall all have to stand before the throne of the king of Kings, for it is not Jesus the human man who will come, it is Christ the King of Kings, to whom all authority in earth and heaven has been given. He will see through us and know our hearts.

So, here we are in the waiting time. What must we do? Stay ready. Keep the flame of faith alive. On Ash Wednesday the priest will say as he marks the cross of ash on your forehead: Dust you are and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ. There is no better advice I can give this Advent.