

21 January 2024

Jonah 3:1-5, 10  
1 Corinthians 7:29-31  
Mark 1:14-20

A cartoon: A dishevelled man wearing a hermit's robe walks the streets with a placard saying "The end is nigh". An observer says to her companion, "He's been walking around with that sign like there's no tomorrow!"<sup>1</sup>

In the various places I have served since becoming ordained, from time to time I will receive message from some local prophet, often handwritten notes popped under the office door. On three occasions now, those notes have included predictions of the end of the world: the most recent was in September last year, and reported that God had told the writer that the world would end on 1 October 2023.

Unless something weird has happened and we're all missing something as a result, it is apparent that the world did not in fact end then!

But what if we did know that on some date very soon the world as we know it is coming to an end?

How we'd respond would very much depend on what we understood the "end of the world" to mean.

If "the end" means everything is going to be utterly destroyed with nothingness to follow, including for ourselves, then a typical response would be to live it up as much as we could in our final days, and to hell with the consequences.

Actually, "to hell with" is a *non sequitur* in that context, because that view relies precisely upon there being nothing, no consequences, following the end. So another response to the impending end, rather than living it up, is to strive for the kind of perfection perceived to be an insurance against that end: *heaven* is the desired destination.

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<sup>1</sup> Cartoon by Jeff Hobbs, viewed at [https://www.cartoonstock.com/directory/p/prophet\\_of\\_doom.asp](https://www.cartoonstock.com/directory/p/prophet_of_doom.asp) [viewed 19/01/2024]

It is exactly this kind of thing that Paul is working through in the middle chapters of 1 Corinthians. We heard another part of this last week – from chapter 6, where Paul talks about sexual immorality. And here now in chapter 7 he is talking about whether those presently unmarried should hasten to get married.

It is easy to approach these sections as if Paul is making a digression from his big theological argument to suddenly get all domestic and moralistic. But what is really going on is that if Paul's big theological argument means anything at all, then it has an impact on morals and domestic arrangements, the way we live our life from day to day.

Paul seems to think that the world as he and the Corinthians know it is about to come to an end.<sup>2</sup>

Paul references what he calls the “appointed time.” In the Greek text this is communicated through the use of a particular word, *kairos*. So, what's the difference between the appointed *kairos* time and what we might call “ordinary” time? Ordinary time is time as it passes each day, tick-tock, tick-tock. We glance at a clock and read ordinary time. We look at a timetable for a sporting event or airline, or an invitation to a party, and we are looking at ordinary time.

However, *kairos* time is what we refer to when an event is about to begin, the time has come —this is *kairos* time. *Kairos* time might be described as the climactic moment following a period of waiting and expectation.

Paul says, “The appointed time has grown short.” Time has become concertina-ed. Time has contracted into itself. We know, of course, that time ordinarily passes second by second and minute by minute, in an ordered, precise, and measurably predictable way. But here Paul is suggesting that the hours and days have shortened and what we expected to be far off, some way in the future, an event that perhaps we might dream about happening one day, some day, at an undefined point in the future, has now come extremely close.

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<sup>2</sup> The following pages owe much to Pillar “Commentary”, quoting freely, in places with my own adaptation.

Paul may have had at least one eye on major regional crisis: a grain famine around that time meant that starvation was a genuine risk, and it called into question the ability of the great Roman empire to keep everyone safe, well, and fed.<sup>3</sup>

But it is clear too that Paul has a bigger picture in mind – and the response to the local crisis might also be seen in the light of that big picture. Earlier in his letter he makes reference to “the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ”<sup>4</sup> and to the expected coming of the Lord.<sup>5</sup> But it is finally in chapter 15 that the big picture becomes clear. Chapter 15 is Paul’s great exposition of the meaning and significance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and it is in this that we find the big picture content of this *kairos* event.

Paul affirms that Christ is “the first fruits of those who have died.”<sup>6</sup> But he then suggests that there will be a radically new status applied also to all those who are “in Christ”, asserting that “for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ”.<sup>7</sup> And then Paul confirms that all this will take place at the coming of Christ.<sup>8</sup>

It is this event – the appearing of the risen Christ, and the resurrection to be enjoyed by all the faithful at that time – that seems to be in Paul’s mind as he encourages, or challenges, or warns the Corinthians, “The appointed time has grown short ... the present form of this world is passing away.”

The present world will one day give way to the world that is to be, the world in which Jesus will have completed his kingly work of defeating all hostile powers, including ultimately death itself.<sup>9</sup>

When that moment arrives, it won’t matter that you followed or didn’t follow some social order or pattern in the way that your family and friends all assumed you would. What will matter is that you were faithful to the Lord in whatever strange circumstances you found yourself.

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<sup>3</sup> Wright, *Paul*, p.91

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:7

<sup>5</sup> See 1 Corinthians 4:5

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:20

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:22

<sup>8</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:23

<sup>9</sup> This and next sentence are from Wright, *Paul*, pp.92-93

Now imagine, if we knew that next Thursday, or in a few days, everything was going to change, a resurrection to the fullness of the life of Christ would take place, and the immanence of the presence of the kingdom of God would be palpable, then I guess our perspective on today, and the ordinary and familiar of today would look very different!

It is for this reason that Paul encourages a holding lightly to the hopes, dreams, values and aspirations of the present life.

Now, we might say: “But Christ hasn’t come; the world hasn’t changed; the general resurrection hasn’t taken place.” And yes, that is correct. So how do we respond? The point is, are we not better to live the kind of life that is appropriate to the age to come, appropriate to the reign of Christ, in anticipation of its coming in fullness? To do otherwise is to side with what will in time be fully defeated; to do otherwise is to side with the enemies of God. We all should do our best to live with the perspective that Paul encourages here. To see our present concerns, and the familiar habits of our everyday life, in the light of the coming of the values, ethics, politics, relationships, and justice of the Kingdom of God.

This perspective not only informs our own lives, but also the message we take to others, to the world. But here we perhaps feel rather like Jonah. I think most of us would feel very uncomfortable if we were told we must warn the world, “Forty more days and you will be overturned”. Jonah fled from the responsibility when it was first given him, which led to the colourful incident at sea in the storm and then in the belly of a great fish. He fled from the responsibility because he did not care for the pagan Ninevites, so he did not want to risk the possibility that they might in fact change their ways and experience God’s compassion rather than destruction.

Is that the reason we would feel uncomfortable bearing the message – because actually we don’t care enough to want the un-saved to have the chance to be saved? Or are we concerned with the possibility of rejection? Or of being thought foolish? But if these latter reasons deter us, then doesn’t that makes us the same as Jonah – we just don’t care *enough* about these people?

One scholar puts it this way: “A Jonah lurks in every Christian heart, whimpering his insidious message of smug prejudice, empty traditionalism, and exclusive solidarity. He that has ears to hear, let him hear and allow the saving love of God which has been outpoured in his own heart to remould his thinking and social orientation.”<sup>10</sup>

I think many of us would even feel uncomfortable if directed to bear the softer message “the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.” We like the “good news” part; but we have difficulty with “repent”. It sounds a bit negative, a bit moralistic, a bit judgemental.

If we feel that way, then perhaps we might reflect on these three points:

First, the good news is about the coming reign of God in and through Jesus Christ. That is good news for those who accept his reign, who turn to him away from all other gods and powers. That is the essence of repentance.

The second point is a corollary of the first: if “good news” is to have any relevant content at all, then “repent” must be part of it. There is no good news of peace if those who make war and those who are unwilling to be reconciled can continue on the way they are. There is no good news of justice if those who offend against others, those who oppress and enslave, those who cheat and deceive, can carry on with impunity. There is no good news of love if those who incite hatred and those who are callously indifferent to the wellbeing of others are allowed to go on hardening their hearts.

Good news and repentance go hand in hand.

Finally, we must share this message of repentance and good news with humility. We don’t carry the message as those who are better than those to whom we speak, but rather as those who too constantly need to repent.

When Jesus says “the time has come” he too uses the *kairos* word that Paul uses.

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<sup>10</sup> Leslie C Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah*, [New International Commentary on the Old Testament], Eerdmans, 1976, p.235; quoted in Henry Sun “Commentary”.

Jesus is conveying the sense of opportune time, of a decisive moment; a time of God's particular favour; at time of the fulfilment of God's plans.

There is in all of this a sense of urgency, a sense of ripeness and rightness; a sense that something is right for this particular time or season that may not have been right for a different season.

Is now perhaps the time we "got over ourselves" and got on with sharing the good news that has been entrusted to us?

We are called to take an attitude of expectation. To hold lightly to today, and to live in the light of what is to come. To take on the values of the coming King, of love, mercy, justice, and compassion, and to live generously in the time we have in the power of his Spirit.

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