

Preached by Lord Harries of Pentregarth (the Rt Revd Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford from 1987-2006), on Sunday 15 November 2015, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford.

Daniel 12; 1-3; Mark 13: 1-8

The world seems a very troubled place, doesn't it? It's not just Paris, which is on all our minds, but so many other places as well. As the Gospel today put it there seems to be nothing but "wars and rumours of wars". Problems everywhere you look, and not much optimism around that things can be changed, let alone fundamentally changed for the better. Gone is the evolutionary optimism of the 19th century. Gone is the Socialist optimism of the 20th. Our slogan might be that of Albert Camus "Let us think clearly and not hope anymore." But though we do indeed need to think clearly, no Christian, or Jew can share that final pessimism. For us hope is fundamental, even in the direst situation. On a wall in the besieged Warsaw ghetto in 1942, written by an unknown Jew, were found the words

I believe, I believe, I believe,
With a perfect faith
In the coming of the messiah;
And in the coming of the messiah, I believe.
And even though he tarry,
I nevertheless believe,
Even though he tarry
Yet, I believe in him.
I believe, I believe, I believe.

Throughout the Old Testament there is a great longing and looking forward to that coming, to a new, better age. It was expressed in this morning's first lesson from the prophet Daniel for example.

The dynamic behind the Christian faith was the conviction that this new age had indeed dawned. The central message of Jesus was that people were to *metanoia*, which at its Greek root means change their whole outlook on life, because the rule of God in human affairs was near. So Jesus proclaimed the longed-for new age, the presence of God's kingdom with us, and after his resurrection the first followers were convinced that in some decisive sense it had indeed come in and with him, and that this would be followed soon by its glorious consummation when God's rule would be recognised by all. As today's Gospel puts it the wars and rumours of war are "The first birth pangs of the new age."

Yet life seemed to go on much as before. To the eyes of the world nothing much seemed to have changed. That is the main reason the bulk of the Jewish people did not share the Christian faith in Jesus and why a Jew could still cry out as he did in the Warsaw ghetto for the Messiah to come. Gradually in the New Testament we see Christians coming to terms with the fact that Christ was not coming again as quickly as they had first thought, and over the first centuries they shifted their focus away from the hope that this world would soon be totally renewed to the hope of heaven after death.

As far as the course of this world is concerned I think we are wise to be agnostic. Our time scale is so much longer than that of our forebears. Martin Rees, the former Astronomer Royal tells us the world could have billions of years to run and that life in the future could be

unimaginably different from what it is now. We do not know when or how God will bring this earthly life to its close. So what do we know?

As Christians in New Testament times came to terms with the fact that the world was not going to dramatically change as quickly as they first thought, they also began to think more profoundly about what it really meant to believe that this new age had in some decisive sense come with Jesus, that God's reign had really begun in him and with him. Their growing conviction was that through faith in Jesus we can come to live that new life of the Kingdom now; we can live in God and let God live in us - so that this new life, this love, is expressed in our relationships with others. It was this that gave birth to the little communities of mutual support growing up round the Mediterranean world. This was a kind of life that already transcended space and time, which was an anticipation of the new heaven and earth, a foretaste of heaven if you like. This is a way of seeing things that is fundamental to John's Gospel and the epistles that bear his name. As one verse in an epistle puts it "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another" (1 John 3:14) We know that we have already passed from death to life because our life is rooted in Jesus, and channels divine love to others.

The first Christians did not abandon their belief that there would be an ultimate consummation of God's purpose for life on earth when his glory would be resplendent in all things. Nor should we. We do not know when this will be. We do not know what form it will take, whether within or beyond what we experience as time. But the hope remains. Yet hope is only one element in the great Christian trilogy of faith, hope and love. The focus for us, as it came to be for the first Christians, is faith in Jesus as enabling us to participate even now in the life to come, and love as a sign of the reality of that faith. Although the end of time is not yet. The end, in the sense of the *telos*, the goal or purpose of human life has been disclosed - through Christ, the mutual indwelling of God and humanity.

The novelist William Golding, whom you probably know from his sobering novel *Lord of the Flies*, was once asked how he would describe his outlook. He replied that he was a universal pessimist but a cosmic optimist. We can share that cosmic optimism. What about his pessimism? It is true that Christians, with our belief in the reality of sin, will not be too beguiled by any thought of a human made utopia. Every partial progress is fragile, and liable to be destroyed on the rock of human egoism. But every partial progress is well worth struggling for and every partial progress is in its way a sign of God's final kingdom. And if it is true that things are never so bad that they cannot get worse, they are also never so bad that they are totally devoid of an element of redemption. So in every situation, however bad, we will seek what good can be done, for God is ceaselessly at work bringing good out of evil. We will act with a faith that is expressed in love and rooted in hope.

It is easy for anyone who follows the news and is sensitive to the world's pain to despair. The Gospel description seems all too accurate: "for nation will go to war against nation, kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in many places; there will be famines." So in moments of despair, how can we bring our faith to bear? One simple way is by use of the Jesus Prayer

"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy, or pity on us". It is a prayer which Eastern Christians urge should be said unceasingly, all day in every situation, and this message has been taken up by a number of Western spiritual leaders as well. The invocation "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God", takes us immediately into the Divine presence - then however bad the

situation that we are aware of, personally or in the world, it can be brought before Jesus. This is not a pious escape from the brutal realities of the world, but a bringing to bear on it of that Divine rule which broke into the world with Jesus, and lives through us now. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have pity on me. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have pity on your broken and troubled world.

To that Son, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be all glory now and for evermore.