



Apocalypse and anti-apocalypse

Today's Gospel is of the apocalyptic variety. It fits very nicely with the tenor of our fretful age.

I had an apocalyptic experience on Monday morning, on finding what I assumed to be a crow in one of the rooms at work. Close-up, they are big. It must have come down the chimney. And it had been there long enough to leave its calling card (so to speak) liberally spread over the carpet and furniture.

It was using a chandelier as its perch, and from that vantage point kept swooping towards the closed window, bashing its head on the glass pane, by then splattered with droplets of blood. Once I had opened the window it escaped. And it was then that the apocalyptic overtone became clear. Within moments of its escape, the sky darkened and there was a roll of thunder. All very Hitchcockian. As a colleague noted, had this been the Middle Ages, we would have been quick to appease the Gods and to take cover. Even as post-moderns we were unnerved by what had happened.

You might wonder if it was a portent given the political events that unfolded at Westminster in the week, but I think that what I have described was too postcode-specific to count as a warning to the nation.

This morning's Gospel, and other apocalyptic fireworks in scripture, can feed our fantasies and fears. They can make anxiety and not joy our near-habitual residence. They speak of wars and rumours of wars; of nation rising against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; of earthquakes and fire and brimstone. It sounds like the everyday news bulletins to me. It all conspires to make thoughtful people frightened.

Fear and anxiety lead to a terrible and debilitating condition: one which closes the door to joy and real self-expression. One which constricts the relationship we are invited into by God. It shuts down all the creative possibilities that life and love offer.

We don't need Mark's apocalyptic reminders, for we have seen these things with our own eyes, in our own time. A majority of us here were born in a century of brutality which witnessed more killings than any other century since we humans arrived. That theme continues into the current century. And just now we are caught up in what might be called apocalyptic convulsions by referendum.

Instead of taking Mark as today's text, I'd like to take this from the Jesuit Anthony de Mello. It is one of his 'one minute meditations': "All questions at the public meeting that day were about life beyond the grave. The Teacher only laughed and did not give a single answer. To his disciples, who demanded to know the reason for his evasiveness, he later said, "Have you observed that it is precisely those who do not know what to do with this life who want another that will last forever?" "But is there life after death or is there not?" persisted a disciple. "Is there life *before* death? - that is the question!" said the Teacher."

Christians are often preoccupied with the life after death. It gets proclaimed liturgically all the time; and some people are so constantly thinking of that future that they become non-resident aliens to the present.

Eternity is now, isn't it? It must be a fiction of perspective to imagine that 'eternity' somehow begins later. True, we are living out this part of eternity in a time-bound form, but it is still eternity. And if that is so, this moment, and every moment has an eternal property and possibility.

Anthony de Mello's Teacher is being prophetic and provocative. I realise his question opens up many things we might consider, but let's focus on the practical and turn away from the collapse of the Jerusalem Temple, and from wars and rumours of wars, and from the endless, contemporary claims of catastrophe and doom. Let's call it fostering the anti-apocalyptic.

Truths are not worth much if they cannot be lived and tested. How can we live amongst the apocalyptic background noise, remain sane, and be useful people to one another and to God? How can we make something of value from our lives *before* death? These are big questions. Let me speak of just one aspect, that of seeking to live more *simply*.

I want to try to persuade you that we live largely within a fiction. Of course, many say that Christianity is a fiction (not an unreasonable point, by the way), but let's set that aside too.

The fiction I have in mind is what is sometimes called the social construction of reality. In other words, it is what we create ourselves (or have created for us by others), and which we then unwittingly take to be all there is.

We live in a world in which some key fictions are taken as... well, as gospel. A common one is that money is the measure. It says that achievement equals material success; that material success and prosperity equal happiness; that this must be the goal of every human person. This is alien to what the Gospels point to.

Never have human minds and hearts been so aggressively seduced by fictions than now. The arrival of news and advertising media, the production line, the consumer-oriented society and more recently so-called social media all make for a potent brew. And if we have no defences against them, a potent source of distress too.

Desires and wants are fanned constantly. We vary in how much we are affected, but my hunch is that virtually all of us are, and that it has become a fiction so effective that we rarely see that there is a problem. It has grabbed us by the unconscious. It takes effort to trace the impact of this greed and insecurity on our lives, and courage to begin to address it.

Which brings us to ask what the Christian faith has to say to us about it. Now, this is not entirely straight-forward because some Christians view money making within a consumerist framework as thoroughly OK. Other Christians cope with a materialist consumer culture with apparent ease. Why, we even have preachers proclaim a 'prosperity gospel'.

We are creatures of our time as well as of eternity; we reach different positions on these questions. But the gospel is a challenge to every age and every soul except those which either sentimentalise or castrate it – or simply ignore it. Those who risk an open minded encounter with it (that means *reading* it, by the way!) are very likely to be unsettled. It's a holy unsettlement. And it does have something to say about our assumptions concerning wealth and money and how we live, who we are and what we can become.

The invitation to live simply and modestly is a thread which spins out from the Gospels and runs through Christian history. It is apparent in the life of Jesus, it is a feature of early and mediaeval Christianity, we see it exemplified in people like the Desert Fathers and Mothers, in monasticism and markedly in what we call non-conformist Christianity - the Shakers, Quakers, the Amish and others.

Sure enough, it is a thread which gets lost at times. Even so, might we claim that living simply, and what today we might call anti-consumerist practice, form an authentic sign of the work of the Spirit? This seeking to live simply always shows an awareness of the astonishing gift which is this Earth, of the richness to be found in moderation and balance, and the freedom which springs out of detachment from the fictions that are to be found in every age and invariably found nested within our deepest anxieties.

Simplicity finds varied forms: simplicity in behaviour, simplicity in worship, simplicity in patterns of consumption, simplicity in character, simplicity in all things. Simplicity here is not stupidity, dreariness, emptiness or meanness. Rather, it represents freedom from the fictions of our day, and it radiates a beauty that reveals as an exploitative sham the enduring '*Because you're worth it*' advertising strapline. It opens ourselves up to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit by dispensing with artifice.

There is every reason to believe that God is concerned with our life *before* death. **We must be too.** We may have no real choice but to live with wars and rumours of wars, and to witness altogether too many horrors and harmful fictions in human affairs. **But we can choose to dissent and change;** we can modify and shape our own lives *before* death. We can do it today. It's never

too late to start, and there will be many points at which such efforts have to be started anew.

Sometimes we can confuse ourselves about what is required. Is it a new technique of prayer perhaps, or new busy-ness in good causes? I doubt it. Rather, we might try to simplify. See it as a process of revealing your essential self – uncomplicated in the eyes of God, and a wonderful part of a wondrous creation.

For many, this approach brings a growing freedom from acquisitiveness, from any idolatry of possessions or reputation, and fosters a quality best described as transparency, which, too, is a mark of holiness. Does all this mean you become a Holy Joe? Not for a moment – for it is God's good pleasure that you become fully human, fully connected to the world and to others, not separated from it or them. It is the nature of that relationship that changes. A bit like that trapped crow: no longer repeatedly bashing its head against a pane of illusory freedom, and instead finding a route to inner freedom. I know from conversations that many here have made that discovery.

Advent is just around the corner. You know that it is the season before Christmas, and that the world overlooks it because Christmas has been taken hostage by those very fictions I have mentioned. And you know that Advent is a season of preparation for Christmas proper, which arrives not until Christmas Day. If you are thinking what to make of Advent this year, why not try exploring and practising simplicity and seeing where it takes you.

The focus of Advent preparation is to help us better understand the shocking meaning and message of the Incarnation – of God taking human form in Jesus and making a radical, costly, incredible incursion into the muck and splendour of our lives.

And why might God bother with such a thing? Here's why: *Because you're worth it.* Not in the superficial, exterior way of the cosmetic ad, but in the deepest sense possible.

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