

Entering the millennium on Christian time

## **On pilgrimage through history**

January 5, 2000

Are we there yet?" my son Andy cries just as we are pulling out of the driveway. "Are we there yet?" when we drive up to the McDonald's take-away window. "Are we there yet?" when we stop at a traffic light. No, not yet. Unable to grasp any estimate I might give him (is an hour short? is a day long?), he fusses, then falls asleep, only to wake up surprised upon our arrival.

"Is it morning yet?" I hear Andy call out from his bedroom. I check the clock: 3:00 a.m. "No," I say, "it's still sleep time." He takes my word for it and goes back to sleep.

"Is it morning yet?" I hear again. Now it is 6:45 on Saturday morning. "No," I lie. "Well, yes, but it's early morning, and you can sleep some more." Andy goes back to sleep.

It's 8:00 a.m. This extra bit of sleep, gratuitous as it is, makes me think of the refrigerium, or heavenly refreshment, that souls in purgatory are said to enjoy on occasion. I wake Andy up. "Is it morning?" he asks. "Yes!"

Next to his bed is a puzzle clock. It has a smiling face and hands that point wherever you turn them. The hours are represented by multicolored plastic blocks, and these blocks are scattered across the rug. Andy doesn't mind; it's enough for him to know that morning is waking time and night is sleep time; he lets the o'clocks tumble as they may.

We grownups are similarly in the dark when it comes to interpreting times, but we are considerably more anxious about it. We wonder, as we enter the next millennium, whether history just goes on and on, producing one catastrophe after another (if we read the newspapers), one damn thing after another (if we read our appointment books) or ever-new opportunities for growth and self-realization (if we take our bearings from inspirational bestsellers). We are unsure whether to view the

year 2000 as an apocalyptic wake-up call or as something to be gotten through with a minimum of fuss (I usually contrive to be asleep before midnight every New Year's, even though I rarely manage to do so on ordinary nights).

Christians who live by a liturgical calendar can safely sleep through New Year's Eve without fear of missing the end of the old age or the beginning of the new. For the Christian, New Year began on the first Sunday of Advent (when, by a secular reckoning, we were still the subjects of a waning epoch) and the season of Christmastide swells high enough to span both years, carrying us straight through until Twelfth Night or even Candlemas of 2000.

During Advent, we heard scriptural readings on the coming of our Lord in glory to judge the living and the dead. Advent is always the season for eschatology, regardless of the calendar year. Each Advent, we are warned to stay vigilant, keep our lamps trimmed, and avoid trying to second-guess the divine timetable: "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mark 13:32). The habit of sober watchfulness that Advent instills should keep us from falling prey to the millennial hype that surrounds us.

But sobriety is not the same as skepticism or indifference. Far from being an arbitrary notation, the year 2000 has a heraldic significance: it points to Christ (hence many scholars who want to be neutral about the marking of world historical time use BCE and CE). It is entirely fitting that crossing the threshold of the third millennium should make us more alive to the promise of our Lord's imminent return, and more filled with wonder about it.

Are we there yet? I have to admit that, whether for want of imagination or want of nerve, I have always had some difficulty with the doctrine of the Second Coming. When the "four last things" (death, judgment, hell and heaven) are proposed for meditation, my tendency is to focus on personal eschatology: What happens when we die? What can we hope? Where are the dead? Can the dead on whom God's mercy rests have a share in the "life of the world to come"?

Some biblical scholars and theologians have argued that the idea of personal immortality was smuggled into Jewish and Christian thought from Greek philosophy, that it is incompatible with biblical realism about death (the name Adam, after all, means "dust"), and that it renders superfluous the promise of resurrection. Yet social surveys show that the vast majority of Americans believe and hope that their

own dead kin and friends live on, fully conscious and alive, in a heavenly realm. The bestseller status of books on near-death experiences attests to a widespread preoccupation with the afterlife, undeterred by critics who argue that it is a symptom of a narcissistic culture that prefers eternal longevity to eternal life, expects reward without judgment, and dreams of heaven without taking thought of hell.

What is the proper theological and pastoral response to this striking divergence of views? Surely not to suppress belief in immortality—there are enough forces already working to destroy hope. More fruitful would be to reclaim the full Christian teaching in which belief in personal immortality is folded into and dependent upon the proclamation of Christ's sacrificial death, resurrection, ascension and parousia. What better time to undertake this work of reclamation than now, at the turning of the age, when we are attuned to thoughts of end times?

There are things we need to unlearn: First, our association of end times with pessimistic readings of history. When in the course of this bloodiest of centuries the Enlightenment dream of progress finally came unraveled, it was replaced, in some people's minds, by visions of nuclear annihilation, ecological devastation and cultural deterioration. After activism burns out, the ash it leaves behind is resignation. One may reflect that human beings are, after all, but one species among many, so there is no reason to complain to Mother Nature if they die out, whether in the course of evolution or by their own criminal stupidity. This is emphatically not the Christian vision of end times.

The religions of the world present us with instructive analogues to Christian eschatology; but if such analogies are pressed too far, we may be left with misreadings of the distinctive Christian hope. One thinks of the Bhagavad Gita's searing vision of Krishna: "I am the source of the universe, just as I am its dissolution. . . . As an eon ends, all creatures fold into my nature, Arjuna; and I create them again as a new eon begins" (*The Bhagavad-Gita*, translated by Barbara Stoler Miller [Bantam Books, 1986]). There is no telos to the periodic destruction of old and production of new eons, just as there is no lasting fulfillment to be found in the cycle of rebirth; the highest aspiration is to follow a path of self-discipline and devotion leading to union with the infinite spirit, beyond all worlds and all times. It is a profound and incomparable teaching; but it is not the same as the Christian path, which takes refuge in Christ and awaits his final reign over the new heaven and new earth.

And there is much to unlearn in our habitual ways of thinking about the tribulations that are expected to precede Christ's reign. In the popular imagination, Antichrist is another name for Satan and the last battle has the aspect of a superhero comic book. Here is ample inducement to paranoia—which may be the Antichrist's way of having a bit of fun with us. Hitler and Stalin surely were types of the Antichrist; but who is to say whether the Antichrist of the last days will be so obvious? In R. H. Benson's novel *The Lord of the World*, the Antichrist is a bringer of universal peace.

In any case, the classical Christian view is that we have been living in the end time for the past 2,000 years, the end time Christ announced when he read from the Torah at his synagogue in Nazareth, saying of Isaiah's proclamation of the jubilee year of the Lord's favor, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). While recent interpreters of the historical Jesus may quarrel over whether he was a Cynic philosopher or an apocalyptic prophet, classical Christianity settles for neither of these partial views, making the much more dramatic claim that Christ himself is the Alpha of creation and the Omega of end times. He taught wisdom like a Cynic philosopher because he was Wisdom. He proclaimed the imminent end of the saeculum because it did in fact end with him when by his death and resurrection he overcame the rule of sin and death. As icons of the harrowing of hell suggest, the general resurrection is already in progress, the jaws of death are broken, graves are being emptied, the new heaven and new earth have already begun to be realized.

And yet, as in Luther's hymn, "still our ancient foe doth seek to work us woe." In *The Possibility of Resurrection*, philosopher Peter van Inwagen makes the point that Hitler continued to cause great harm for some time after he was effectively defeated. So, too, we may see the appalling events of our own day as the prolonged agon of the Adversary, even in end game.

But there is another way of reading the Christian centuries that needs to be squared with this view. Beginning with Luke's Book of Acts, Christian writers have interpreted the historical experience of the delay of the parousia as an essential feature of Advent watchfulness, its very prolongation being a work of redemption over which the Holy Spirit especially presides. We are on pilgrimage through history; and who is to say how long this pilgrimage is meant to last? Depending on where one looks one sees Christianity in decline (for instance, in much of northern Europe) or in vigorous growth (for instance, in Africa and Latin America). We are still trying to figure out what beliefs are nonnegotiable. We still live in an age of martyrs and heroic saints,

of apostates and world-weary skeptics. When one thinks how few generations actually separate us from the time of the disciples, it is not hard to imagine that future historians might count us among the early Christians.

If genuine Christianity consists, as Kierkegaard says, in being “contemporaneous with Christ,” chronological location is beside the point. We are in Andy’s position: uncertain whether it is morning or night, we have to live on trust.