

The Future - what should we know?

A sermon on Matthew 24:27-35, 45-51 by Nathan Nettleton, 1 December 2019

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Message

We can face the unknown future with confidence because we know that the one who holds the future loves us and can be trusted.

Sermon

On the road to Warburton, there is a little place called Wesburn. Does anyone know Wesburn? Well the thing that most people used to know Wesburn for was the Baptist Church. They remembered it because of the sign they used to have out the front. It read, “Wesburn Baptist Church - Independent, Pre-millennial, Fundamental.” If ever there was a sign designed to put you off coming to church, it’s that one. I was certainly never game to go there. The only bit that gave me any comfort is the “Independent” line because it meant they were not a member church of our Baptist Union.

In an obscure sort of way, the sign reminded me a bit of a song. It used an Edith Piaf tune for a spoof [written by Greg Champion, and called The French Song](#). It was just a collection of familiar, but randomly sorted French words, sung with mock seriousness, and it’s very funny. So the first lines were:

*Pate escargots soup de jour
cordon bleu chic coiffure
fait accompli maison
creme de menthe Marcel Marceau
meringue blancmange Bardot
gauche gay Paris garçon*

And the sign out at Wesburn always made me want to write another funny song full of weird theological words that nobody understands. “Pre-millennial, fundamentalist, eschaton, propitiation, perichoresis, exegetical, glossolalia.” There you go - the first verse written!

Now, why am I taking the mickey out of the good folk at Wesburn, who have after all since repented of their bizarre sign and taken it down. Well, mainly because of the second line on their old sign: “pre-millennial”. Just as a matter of interest, how many of you are confident that you know what “pre-millennial” means?

It is a term that refers to a particular view about the biblical prophesies about the end of the world. And if you happen to be into these debates, you can be a premillennialist, a post-millennialist, or even an a-millennialist, and it all centres around whether you think that a thousand year reign of the saints mentioned in the book of Revelation is going to come before or after Jesus returns, or not at all. Personally I’m an I-haven’t-got-the-foggiest-idea-alist.

Now if any of you think that that question is so important that we’d better sort it out and put up a sign out the front about it, then I suspect you’re going to be rather annoyed by the rest of my sermon and you’re probably already disgusted by what’s actually on our signs out the front.

Each year, this first Sunday of this season of Advent brings us Bible readings full of images of the coming end of the world as we know it, and the establishment of the eternal reign of God. In the evocative apocalyptic language we hear of the moon dripping with blood, the stars falling from the sky, and the New Human riding in on a cloud with power and great glory. And every year when faced with that, most of us who don't know much about pre-millennialism or post-millennialism cringe a bit, and wonder whether there is anything we can say about it all that doesn't sound like a crazy old sign at the Wesburn Baptist Church.

Bizarre speculations about the end of the world tend to come in waves. Many of us remember how intense some of the end-of-the-world fanaticism was when the year 2000 was approaching, but apart from a few computer glitches, it passed without any new apocalypse. Even the computer glitches were a lot less than everyone feared.

Nowadays the end-of-the-world speculation seems to relate to global terrorism, Donald Trump, China, or climate change. The climate change one is the easiest to relate to the apocalyptic imagery from the Bible because faced with unprecedented bushfires and the like, the old "turn or burn" line is starting to sound like just sensible environmental planning.

But you don't have to look too far to see what happens to people that get too caught up in fervour about the end of the world. There were a few really high profile ones a couple of decades ago like the Heavens Gate cult with their UFO suicide pact and the Branch Davidians dying together in the Waco Texas inferno. They made the signboard at Wesburn Baptist look almost sensible and mainstream.

So what do we need to know about the eschaton, the last things, the grand finale of all time? Well, I reckon there are only two things that you need to know for sure about it, and these two things seem to be what all the Biblical writings about the subject are saying. The first thing you need to know for sure is that it is all in the hands of the loving and merciful Jesus. And the second thing you need to know for sure about it is that there aren't any more things you can know for sure about it. That's it, plain and simple.

You don't need to know when it's going to be – Jesus said he didn't know himself – you just need to live your life so that you'll be found living faithfully when the day comes. Towards the end of tonight's gospel reading we heard Jesus warning against thinking that no one's watching and there are no consequences and then living abusively because you think you can. It could catch up with you before you realise, he says, and again that just sounds like good sense in light of what we are now seeing with climate change, doesn't it?

But on the other hand, if you are dancing to the tune of God's Spirit and the day comes, you will be found strong of heart, healthy of mind, full of life, just as you were created to be. If not you could be found wasted, shallow and listless, the life you were given as a gift squandered.

If you are living life as a gratefully received gift, you will be found full of integrity, free of greed, anxiety or compulsion, and living at peace with those around you. If not you are more likely to be found drowning in anxiety, narcissism, and nastiness.

No, you don't need to know when the end is coming. Whether it is tomorrow or in a thousand years, live today consciously, honestly, simply, mercifully in gratitude for the love you have been given in Jesus.

The craving to know the details of course, comes only partly from curiosity, and mostly from insecurity. Having seen so many dreams shattered and hopes come to nothing we long for confidence about what the future will hold. We want to see the details in advance to inoculate ourselves against further hurts and disappointments. So why does God withhold them from us? It seems a reasonable enough desire. Well, although we might not get the details, God does not withhold grounds for confidence.

All you need for confidence in the future is to know whose hands the future is held in. Think about it for a moment. Picture the people who turn up at Tullamarine Airport for one of those Qantas mystery flights. Do they still do those? For those people, there is a great deal of uncertainty about their immediate future. They are about to get into a large tin can, hurtle through the sky and end up who knows where. But do they lack confidence in the future? Not at all. They are excited and expectant, confident that they are going to have a good time. The uncertainty about the destination is part of the fun and they have no fear because they trust that the people who organise these things can operate planes safely and are not going to drop them in the middle of the Simpson desert with a map and a litre of water to walk home.

But how different would it be if the mystery was who was going to fly the plane. If you knew that part of the mystery was that there was only a fifty percent chance that a qualified pilot would actually be on the plane and even then only a forty percent chance that she'd actually be in the cockpit, how many of you would be willing to turn up for a mystery flight then?

The gospel is not good news because it predicts a bright shiny future where all the details are secured in advance and nothing can alter them. The gospel is good news because it promises that the future is in the hands of Jesus, because it promises a future based on the love and faithfulness of God.

In Jesus we have seen the human face of God. We have seen the human God who will embrace us when we thought we were untouchable. We have seen the human God who will heal us when we had given up hope. We have seen the human God who will soften our hearts when we had lost faith in our own ability to love. We have seen the human God who will point out pathways of peace and reconciliation even in places as intransigent as Syria, Afghanistan and Canberra. We have seen the human God who will not let even death have the last say, but breaks free of its clutches, blazing a trail on which all may follow from tragedy to newness of life, full of love and hope.

When we hear the Bible say that we will see the New Human descending on a thunderous cloud with power and great glory, it need not sound like a threatening image to us, because we are the ones who know that the one who comes is the one who has blessed the earth in the past. This glorious all-powerful New Human is also the suffering servant who went to the cross rather than sell out God's love and mercy for us.

That is why we are able to live today with confidence and not fear. Not because we know what tomorrow will look like, but because we know that, in Jesus, God does not give up on the

world. Because we know that there is nothing that can happen to us that can separate us from the love of God and nothing that we can do that is beyond the reach of God's mercy.

Having come to us as Jesus of Nazareth, God promises to come among us as a ruler seated on clouds. The one who arrives on the clouds, that strange, powerful, cosmic Christ, has a face which is none other than the face we saw on a baby at Bethlehem.

We do not know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future. We have a future, and it belongs to Jesus. Thanks be to God.