

The Second Coming

A sermon by David Wilbourne for Advent Sunday

The end of the world is a hot topic.

BBC's Survivors,

with a killer virus taking civilisation out,

has haunted my nightmares this week,

kicking into touch the usual hardy perennials of

a) retaking my Maths A level

and

b) treating the 8 o clockers to a funeral service rather than

the Book of Common Prayer Communion.

If you google End of the World

you are faced with 21 million sites.

Incredibly Google Maps have 27,000 sites

not surprisingly including the port of Calais,

but with a fog horn at the End of the Earth in Mid Lothian

topping the charts,

with helpful directions and nearby places of interest.

There must be a place in America called

End of the Earth

because there is a intriguing road sign to it which reads

End of the Earth: 2 miles

Houghton: 4 miles.

Good to know there is something beyond.

Google Second Coming

and you get 22 million sites,

most connected with W B Yeats poem.

The poem caught my eye because I had just read

a Church Times interview

with MP Frank field,

the ultimate grumpy old man.

'Do I remember sermons?' he fulminated.

'Well I just wish to God they wouldn't preach them.

Why do clergy think

they have to know everything about everything?

Why don't they just read us a poem or something?'

Now whilst MPs denouncing preaching

has something of the sentence

containing black, pot, kettle and calling about it,

I do take his point,

and so on this Advent Sunday

I'll read you Yeats poem:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre,

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;

Surely the Second Coming is at hand.

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out

When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi

Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,

A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,

Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it

Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

The darkness drops again; but now I know

That twenty centuries of stony sleep

Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Whilst I realise
that reading such poems
won't bring them flocking back in the aisles,
it does have some very interesting takes
on the whole Advent theme
of the end of the world and Christ's return.
Yeats wrote it in the aftermath of the Great War
and the Russian revolution,
and saw them as signs,
budding fig trees hinting at season-change
Yeats suspected that one two thousand year aeon or gyre
was coming to an end,
another was opening.

It is a poem
which has fired the imagination

of the world,
in all sorts of different ways.
It has shaped novels
by Stephen King and Arthur Schlesinger.
Pop songs have been inspired by it,
including Synchronicity II by the Police
and Slouching Towards Bethlehem by Joni Mitchell.
Nearly every line of the poem
has at some stage or other been dialogue
in the TV serial the Sopranos,
including an episode where Dr Melfil tells Tony,
'The centre cannot hold,
the falcon cannot hear the falconer.'
The director's cut of the 1995 film *Nixon*
has Richard Nixon, played by Anthony Hopkins,
having the whole of the poem recited to him.
One episode of Heroes entitled the Second Coming

concludes with Mohinder Suresh
narrating the poem in its entirety.

Even the leading article
in the Economist of 18 Sept this year,
on the economic downturn,
makes frequent allusion to the poem,
with phrases like
'The widening gyre' and
'The blood drenched tide' and
'The centre cannot hold'
heading up the main sections.

What is the poem saying?

Well, obviously it is about crisis,
and the terrible end of one age
and the equally terrible beginning of another.

Like all good poems -
and I don't include those awful things that people
try to get published in the parish mag from time to time,
such as the poem,
The Flower Festival
with its immortal line,
'The Rev'd Snelgrove he did see
the flowers when he came to tea.'

- But like all good poems

The Second Coming
contains a feast of phrases,
any one of which could fuel
your imagination for days.

Yeats has borrowed ideas and phrases
from other classics:

Burke's Urizen is 'laid in stony sleep';

'The best lack all conviction,

while the worst are full of passionate intensity'
is not a description of General Synod
or the House of Commons
but is a paraphrase from Shelley's Prometheus Unbound.

'The good are wavering, whilst the worst prevail,'
is how Yeats put it in an earlier draft of his poem,
which interestingly had the title Second Birth
rather than Second Coming.

It is clearly a poem to go away and think about,
and taking my cue from Frank Field,
I don't want to say much more.

Whilst not a classic exposition of Advent,
it is obviously an Advent poem,
drawing on Christian imagery,
particularly apocalyptic stuff
found in the Book of Revelation.

We can take comfort from the universal appeal of the poem
– I don't think we're as cranky as we sometimes fear we are,
reflecting on Advent themes
like crisis and the end of the world
and what follows it.

Everybody seems
to be thinking about and dreading such things.

The difference between an optimist and a pessimist
is that

the optimist thinks that this is the best possible of worlds
the pessimist fears that it is so.

The Christian is neither,
but along with Yeats
thinks that just as Christ transformed the world
and broke history in two, BC/AD,
on his first appearance,
something marvellously strange and hitherto unthinkable

will succeed AD.

The Christian doesn't just think it.

He yearns for it and prays for it,

is alert for it, in the imagery of our Gospel,

and aches for a transformation

of which the Credit Crunch may be the birth pangs.

After all, every Christian will sing this day

to our tune, Helmsley:

Yea, Amen, let all adore thee,

high on thine eternal throne;

Saviour take the power and glory,

claim the kingdom for thine own;

Alleluia!

Thou shalt reign, and thou alone!