

Sermon on the Second Coming

Silvia Purdie, Cashmere Presbyterian Church, Sunday 18 November 2018

Hebrews 12: 22-29

Mark 13: 3-10, 24-27

I've been asking you some tough questions this month. We had: "Where is God?" We had "What happens to us after we die?". And here's my tough question for you this morning: "How long have we got?" ... as in, **when will it all end? And how?**

If you Google 'how will the universe end?' you get a curious mix of possible scientific answers. The possibilities hinge, apparently, on the precise measurement of how fast the galaxies are travelling away from each other, which is complicated because apparently they are travelling away from each other faster and faster, which is, apparently, quite hard to explain and involves something which no one can measure called Dark Energy, which apparently there is quite a lot of in the universe even though no one knows what it is or how to observe it – basically the scientists are all guessing. But the fact remains that the universe is expanding, as in, all the galaxies are flying away from each other quite quickly, which obviously means that eventually everything will be a long way away from everything else and the stars will eventually burn themselves out and even the black holes will implode on themselves until there's really not a lot left. Apparently, eventually, the universe will just get really cold and really dark. All a bit gloomy really.

What you need to know is that this picture of how everything turns out in the end is utterly utterly different from how the Bible pictures how everything turns out in the end.

With the beginning of the universe, the way the Bible describes how everything began actually lines up pretty well, in my opinion, with how the scientists describe it. I am quite OK with the idea that 13.7 billion years ago the universe burst into being in a single moment of time and the most mighty flash of light and power and sound that ever there was ... that seems to me quite a good way of describing what the Bible says, that in the beginning God said "Let there be light" and there was light.

But when it comes to the ultimate destiny of the universe, there we hit two utterly different ideas. This morning I want to explore with you what the Bible does actually say about the ultimate destiny of the universe, what Jesus said about it, and get you thinking about what you actually think about it. I have never preached about this before, and I doubt that many of your previous ministers have talked much about this either.

But it is a hot topic for many Christians in the world today. Many people strongly and sincerely believe that we are living in the end times, that the trials and troubles of our world today are heralding the end, the return of Jesus. And they might be right. But I think they are wrong if they think that the possible imminent return of Jesus lets us off the hook from bothering about the mess our world is in at the moment. We had a seminar here a couple of months ago about sustainability and faith, and part of that was to push back at those who say that the end is nigh so it doesn't matter about the masses of plastic in the oceans or the toxins in the ground or the destruction of the forests ... like 'it's all a bad dream and we're going to wake up any minute and be in heaven so who cares?'. I for one passionately hope that I will have grandchildren and greatgrandchildren and that the world that they grow up in will still have coral reefs and sweet pure rain and birds and bees and chimpanzees.

So, there you are, a tough start to the sermon this morning. Two levels of dystopian futures for life the universe and everything ... the long view of a universe floating apart becoming cold and lifeless through the eons ... and the more immediate view of our planet rapidly losing the beauty and diversity of life that God has created. Help! We desperately need hope. We are promised hope, it's part of the Gospel promise, part of the gifts of Advent. Hope is basic, essential to our faith ... and we need it now more than ever, surely. Hope is in short supply out there.

What, then, is the Christian hope?

I absolutely reject the idea that it is a ticket to "get us out of here" ... no way does the Bible paint a picture of a few faithful people getting whisked up into some super-spiritual paradise to live forever with Jesus while the rest of the universe goes to hell in a handcart. That is absolutely not what the Bible teaches.

I also absolutely reject the idea that God has washed his hands of us. It's common enough in our secular world view to have a vague idea that the universe might have a spiritual creative force behind it, but when we look around at the huge problems that face our world it's quite understandable to feel that God, if God exists, has left us to our own devices, given us up as a bad job. That is absolutely not what the Bible teaches.

So if not those, then what? What does the Bible teach?

I have three claims which I read when I read the Bible. I think the Bible is reasonably consistent about it; the problem is that when we come to those bits of the Bible which talk about this kind of thing we tend to glaze over and skip ahead to bits that make more sense to us. So our Bible readings today are not ones I have preached on before, or even really thought much about. They just don't fit very well with what feels normal to us. But here goes. Three claims of our Bible regarding the ultimate fate of the universe.

First, that God is capable of stepping in and taking over.

Second, that one day heaven and earth will merge.

and thirdly that faith and hope in the future return of Jesus puts our everyday lives into a different frame of reference.

1. God can step in and take over

So here's my first claim, that God is able to step in dramatically and change everything. God is able to step in dramatically and change everything. The Bible describes this as Jesus himself coming back, literally stepping in to history and bringing in an utter transformation of space and time.

Really? Do you believe in a God who is bigger than the created universe, more powerful than all the power in the universe, and who greater than all the laws of nature? If this is not your view of God, I am not here to criticise or judge your faith. This whole idea of God taking charge of everything in a very direct hands-on way may well be anathema to you. I just want to say that I actually do believe that God is capable of this.

To me this is what Jesus caught a glimpse of and tried to communicate. When Jesus said that the Son of Man will come in clouds and great power and glory, this is what I understand him to be saying – that he could imagine and predict the unimaginable brilliance of God breaking in to ordinary earthly reality.

Not only is God capable of this, says the Bible, but God has the right. Jesus several times described the world as lease-hold land, us as the tenants and God as the owner; it's a theme that crops up in several of his stories and teachings. You know how it works with a

lease – when the lease is up the owner gets the property back. It is a basic Biblical principle that we are only tenants, not landlords, of this planet. That's what our word 'stewardship' means. We're taking care of the place. And if we don't do a very good job of it at any time the owner could call in the lease and say "time's up give it back". So that was my first point, that God can step in and take over, any time God chooses to do that. I don't know if or when that will happen, but I do believe that it is possible.

So if Jesus does come back and God takes charge of everything, what might that possibly look like? This gets me to my second point. My reading of the Bible is that what it claims is that eventually our separate categories of heaven and earth will be broken down.

2. One day spiritual reality and physical reality will merge

The Bible prophecies that the God will one day recreate everything, making a new heaven and a new earth, or more precisely bringing heaven and earth together. The claim of scripture is that this is the ultimate future and destiny of the universe. This is the biggest Christian hope, that all things, both tangible and intangible, seen and unseen, all things, will one day come together in Christ.

Paul puts this so beautifully in his opening paragraph to the Ephesians, 1:9-10:

"God has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, ¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, both things in heaven and things on earth."

When we talk about the second coming of Christ, we are saying that heaven will break through into earth in a total all-encompassing way. We know heaven, just a tiny bit, in our lives and in our fellowship and worship, we know fragments, little moments, glimpses of heaven, we get a little taste of the kingdom of God, we see it in a child's smile, we hold it in our hands in Communion, we hear an echo of it in the silence, or a tui's song.

The Bible promises that one day, one day, heaven will be a complete reality, merged with our world, integrated into our universe. Lord only knows what that will look like, but that is the promise of scripture.

OK, OK, you might or might not be willing to accept that as a possibility, but either way, what difference does it make? Why should we even attempt to stretch our minds so far from the problems of our lives and our world right now?

This gets me to the third claim of the Bible about the grand future of the universe, which is that it matters for everyday life in the present day.

3. The ultimate putting right of things puts our current problems into a different frame

It does matter, how you picture the end, for how you live the now. If you expect your marriage to end in divorce sooner or later that will affect how you invest of yourself in that relationship. 'Is this world worth investing ourselves in?' is a huge and vital question. The answer of the Bible is a resounding YES!

The writer of Hebrews describes a vision of all created things, both physical and spiritual, being "shaken and removed so that what cannot be shaken will remain", and then immediately jumps back to the here and now with a "therefore". In the Good News it says "Let us be thankful, then, because we receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Let us be grateful and worship God in a way that will please him, with reverence and awe" (12: verse 28)

In my Bible at home it says, "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us hold on to grace; by grace we may serve God with reverence and awe". Live with grace and gratitude, because all belongs to God and will return to God. Our vision of the ultimate future affects us here and now. Living with a great vision of God's recreation of all things gives us reverence and awe, gives us a heart to serve and do the little we can in our day to point to this re-creation.

Jesus goes on to say "Watch! Look out! Be on guard. Be alert." You don't know when the master will return. Don't let him find you sleeping." ... which obviously does not mean that we must never sleep. Jesus is talking about complacency, warning us to not just blend in with the world, but to be always on the look out for what God is doing, always looking to be in on the action, helping to be signs for the kingdom of heaven, together as a church, individually at work, as families, at home, with friends ...

The Bible teaches that the return of Jesus at the end of the age gives us more courage to do our bit in our moment of time. Stand up for what is right. Speak what is right. Live and love so that we are ready for the kingdom, ready for heaven to break through. This is our hope, and this is our destiny – not just us but all the universe.

To finish, to quote Tom Wright who has been my teacher through this series. He describes the Christian belief in the second coming of Jesus as "neither a rejection of the present world, nor his arrival like a superman, but the **transformation** of the present world, and ourselves with it, so that it will at last be put to rights." (p156)

*For this sermon series I am indebted to Tom Wright's book 'Surprised by Hope' (2007)
Tom Wright is the Bishop of Durham.
(If you would like to read more, David Troughton might lend it to you if you ask nicely!)*