

Don't Dissolve the Tension
Advent 3, Year A
James 5: 7-1, Matthew 11: 2-11
12 December 2010

Amidst all the frenzy of pre-Christmas preparations there is one group of people who won't be bothered or stressed at all. The Jehovah's Witnesses don't celebrate Christmas, or their own birthdays for that matter – think of all the money saved on presents. They also don't accept blood transfusions, and limit their associations with non-Jehovah's Witnesses to the absolute minimum. It is part and parcel of a complete rejection of the surrounding world as utterly evil and unredeemed.

What compensates for all that is their ardent expectation of the imminent return of Christ, who will reign over the righteous for a thousand years in a perfect world, which will be a prequel to the even better world coming over the horizon of the Kingdom of heaven. People who believe in this sort of thing are called millennialists. They are to be found both outside and inside the Christian religion. The most notorious fringe Christian group would be David Koresh and his branch Davidians, 80 of who died in the siege of their headquarters at Waco, Texas. What millennialists of all descriptions have in common is that they can't bear the discrepancy between God's promised ideal world and the contradictory signs of failure, suffering and oppression in the actual world.

At the opposite extreme are those believers who are so happy with what is going on around them that they rather think that things couldn't get much better. Some of the Corinthian Christians who Paul was trying to sort out were like this – spiritual

athletes who thought that they so perfect and accomplished that all the good things promised by God had come true for them in the here and now. Later on Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, eulogised the Emperor Constantine so much that you could be forgiven for thinking that the newly Christianised Roman Empire was just about as good as things were ever going to get in an earthly society. There were some Christians in late 19th century and early 20th century Europe who believed that God stood so far square behind all the technological, scientific and political improvements of their day that progress now equalled the Kingdom of God. The theological diagnosis for this form of spiritual sickness is chiliasm, a bad case of over realised eschatology in which the promised end has already happened in a rather superficial and shallow earthly way.

At a preaching seminar I attended some years back John Bluck gave some excellent advice that I have never forgotten. A good sermon depends on your ability to build a sense of tension right from the start. Begin in such a way that you surprise them and leave them wondering, "Where is he going with all this?" Keep developing the tension right through the sermon, arousing their curiosity more and more, getting the congregation to the point where they are agog to know how you are going to resolve all this, and don't discharge the tension until the very end when the suspense is killing them. The same dynamics of course apply to a novel, film or play that stands out in our memory.

The reason why this curiosity thrilled the cat approach is so appealing to us is because it is deeply located in the structure of human reality. How does the story turn out is a question we are constantly

asking about the human story, caught as we are between our unfulfilled longings and our fear and wonder at a world that is proceeding on with agendas that we can hardly get our head around. The tension is always building between our hopes and longings and the ambivalent and sometimes heartbreaking events that can overtake us. The same dynamic plays out in the Christian religion.

Donald Hagner has these wise words to say about today's gospel passage:

Without question the kingdom brought by Jesus involves the experience of wonderful things...Nevertheless, for all the joy and fulfillment available to the recipients of the kingdom in the present, there is at the same time the undeniable reality of the continued experience of the effects of evil in this world. When confronted by the latter it is possible for Christians to "take offense" at Jesus and the nature of the salvation he has brought. If Jesus has brought the kingdom and if Christians have begun to experience eschatological blessings through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, it is perhaps natural to expect and want the eschaton now. But that is precisely what Jesus does not offer. And thus in the present the disciple of Jesus must be prepared for something less – indeed, for the reality of suffering and death – while even confessing the messianic identity and authority of Jesus, thereby expressing faith in the good news he has announced.

What millennialists and chiliasts have in common is that they can't bear the tension in the human story. They want to dissolve it by either saying the world is going to hell in a hand basket and we want nothing to do with it, or that the world is a groovy and cool

place where God's purposes have pretty much come true in what we are keen on. In the first approach the resolution of a world gone wrong comes from Jesus stepping in any minute now to reagenda everything, or in the second case Jesus invisibly blending himself in with some of our pet agendas. The Jehovah's Witnesses are always having to retimetable Jesus' imminent return since he infuriatingly won't turn up when we want him to. And progressive minded Christians are always getting caught out by their over-optimism that fails to take account of human self destructiveness, and the fact that their take on the good life always has more anthropology than theology in it.

What James in his farming image, and Matthew with his fulfilment images, want to get across to us is the need for patience in the Advent watch. Yes, God will sort things out in the end, but he is not going to do it to our timetable. And we like a good sermon connoisseur must try and enjoy the tension of the human story and the gospel promise, and not try and dissolve it by premature closure. Like a good sermon writer, or novelist, or play writer, or movie director, God is directing the human story in his own way and in his own time until he is satisfied that the characters and the narrative have developed to the point they can be resolved in a satisfying way. The plot lines are rich and complex and deeply absorbing. Why don't we lie back and enjoy them instead of trying to rewrite them according to our weird or self-defeating agendas. Maybe that is the point of being interested in literature or history – we catch glimpses of what he is up to every now and then.

