

An Apocalyptically Charged Gospel
Advent 2, Year B
2 Peter 3: 8-14
4 December 2011

The Hanson brothers were a duo of Anglican priests and theologians. They wrote a book that covered most important theological topics in a clear, coherent, common sense, and highly readable manner.

On one essential item they were common sense and down to earth in a startling and controversial way. When it came to the second coming of Jesus, Christians should take a long, hard, realistic look at their life strategies. Since most of them had insurance policies, pension schemes, and wills that would disperse their worldly wealth to their children, they clearly expected the world to go on more or less as it is, otherwise these prudential arrangements made no sense. In that respect Christians had voted with their chequebooks and their life arrangements against the possibility that God would bring the world to an end in their lifetime, and that new heavens and a new earth would arise, in which none of this wise provision was necessary. Accordingly the Church should publicly acknowledge this reality in its formularies, amend its Eucharistic texts that spoke of looking forward to the return of Jesus in glory, and admit that this was a redundant and mistaken belief of the early Church.

The Hanson's were not the first to take this line. It was a consensus position of many of the most powerful theological minds in German theology in the late 19th and early 20th century. The liberal divinity of the day assumed that there was a close connection between the inner ethical core of the Christian message, and the finest flowering of European culture, learning and progressive ideals. The vivid and disturbing pictorial language to be found in some parts of the New Testament was mythological, confusing, and no longer necessary because Christians were no longer a dispossessed, marginal group.

Enter upon the scene at this point Albert Schweitzer the famous missionary doctor, Bach organ scholar, and theologian, with a disturbing thesis that challenged the cosy assumptions that I have just mentioned. Jesus doesn't make sense unless you take apocalyptic expectations seriously. The Kingdom he most often mentioned in his preaching assumes God's new world breaking in through the midst of this fading world order. The expectation of future vindication and future glory is right at the heart of the New Testament vision. Let that go and you end up with the futile search for the Jesus of history that many of Schweitzer's contemporaries were engaged in. The only Jesus they would discover would be a faint and false reflection of their own enthusiasms of the day. The apocalyptic Jesus, however disturbing to contemporary modern Christians, was the genuine article.

If Schweitzer was right, then what are we to make of today's intriguing reading from 2 Peter, which is clearly trying to deal with the disappointed expectations of some in the early Church? In the first paragraph a clever double strategy is being employed. On the one hand God's time scale and ours are different. What looks like a thousand years to us seems like a day to him. And the delay isn't evidence of Divine neglect and indifference. On the contrary, God is patient and merciful, holding back a final reckoning and last judgement that the Church and humankind in general aren't ready to face just yet. We are being given time to do what we need to do to shape up and get ready.

Douglas Harink, in his outstanding commentary on 1 and 2 Peter, sharpens up this second idea with a contemporary application that might make us wince. He writes of the Church in the west as a compromised Church that is not ready to meet its Lord. Rather than being frustrated or perplexed about the non return of Jesus, it should be profoundly thankful and relieved that it doesn't have to face the judgement that would inevitably come its way if it came face to face with him. There have been too many cosy compromises with wealth and power, too much adaptation to and adoption of shallow and false fads, too much use of slick advertising and the false recruiting methods of the consumer society. The compromised Church needs to repent, to cleanse and purify itself, and to get down on its knees and thank God continually for not confronting it just yet with his terrible, purifying wrath, that is in fact the love that won't take no for an answer.

Then Harink goes on to explain what 2 Peter means when it talks about the sky dissolving in flames and the elements melting in the heat, how all these dramatic changes in the structure and substance of the world bring in the new heavens and the new earth. To do so he draws on the remarkable insights of a 20th century Russian theologian I have long been interested in, Sergius Bulgakov.

Bulgakov asks, where do we see Jesus as most truly himself in his ministry, revealed for who he truly is? The answer is in the Transfiguration. This wasn't just a vision, or a hallucinatory mountaintop episode. The Jesus radiating uncreated light is the Jesus who sits at the right hand of the Father in the life of the world to come. The Jesus glowing with an intense light that no earthly power source could produce is the second person of the Trinity, who dynamically lives within the Trinitarian circuit of the Father and the Holy Spirit, a conduit for and catalyst of the Divine energy that circulates around them like an electric force field.

What is more the uncreated light radiating out of Jesus, that illuminates Moses and Elijah, also renders transparent and

translucent and transfigured the material fabric that makes up the alpine landscape at the top of Mt Tabor. Matter, the stuff of our world, that binds it together and gives it its solidity, has for a brief time become a transmitter of Divine energy. As soon as the Transfiguration is over it goes back to its normal state of being a resister rather than a transmitter of Divine grace. Thus it continues as a blocker of Divine energy, mercifully allowing us to go on in this brief envelope of time in which the mercy and the providence of God gives us a breathing space to get our act together.

For at the end, at the return of Jesus and the end of time and human history, matter will become totally open to, and a transmitter of, the uncreated light flowing from the holy, blessed and glorious Trinity. There will be a fundamental change in the structure of the world. In one sense our world will still be there, but in a more fundamental sense it will be transfigured and transformed into the new heavens and the new earth. The what was the staggering one off of the Transfiguration will be the new normal. We too like Moses and Elijah will glow and glisten as our spiritual bodies reflect back, connect to, and are infused by the Divine energy. I look forward to this glorious conclusion of our lives with eager anticipation.