

"By your endurance you will gain your souls"
(Luke 21: 19)

The war of the worlds begins on television this evening. *The War of the Worlds* is a series based on a Victorian novel in which an unnamed narrator from Surrey and his brother in London tell the story of what might happen if Martians invaded earth. It depicts total war with no moral limits, and the book was at the vanguard of a genre of popular entertainment that swept through cinema and literature throughout the 20th century till now. People seem to enjoy watching and reading apocalyptic stories – of earthquakes, nuclear attacks, volcano eruptions, solar eclipses and so on – but when those stories appear in the bible they give us problems.

Malachi, the last book in the Old Testament, therefore coming almost immediately before another Lord's Day when Jesus was born in Bethlehem, offers a dreadful picture of the day of the Lord as a day that burns like an oven,

and Luke is not alone among the Gospels to draw on the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 to depict a scene of utter destruction:

wars and insurrections when nations rise against nations and kingdoms against kingdoms,
earthquakes, famines and plagues, accompanied by
dreadful portents and signs in the heavens.

Passages like these occur in several places in the Bible, most notably at greater length in the books of Daniel and Revelation. And what do we make of them in peaceful, comfortable south London? Do they have anything to do with us?

First, it's a mistake to associate the bible's apocalyptic literature with the end of time and read them as predictive of awful things that lie ahead. The point of apocalyptic literature is not prediction but revelation, and it's a way of helping us to see what lies around us in a different light, to see beyond what meets the eye to see reality. It lifts the veil from our eyes. Apocalyptic literature is like having a vertical louvre blind over a window.¹ If the blinds are tilted 45° they appear closed and shut out the light when we look at them full on, but, if we

¹ This image of louvre blinds comes from James K.A. Smith, an American professor of philosophy

step to the side and look at the vertical blinds slant, we can see through. Worldly powers (in the case of the bible's apocalyptic literature, the powers of Rome and Babylon) try to control what we see, but the blind of apocalyptic literature lets us see through when we look at it slant and we see what the empires wanted to hide from us. The literature helps us see through the spin.

If ever there was a time when we needed to see through the spin it's now, in an age when we feel we are being deluded by climate change deniers,

during a general election when some of those seeking election try to fool us with false figures and fake news
and when we feel foxed by leaders who I fear will lie as readily as they will blink their eyes.

The apocalyptic passages of the bible are a wake-up call, and yet nowadays we don't need them to tell us that we are the first generation in the world who can easily envisage the means by which we can destroy ourselves. We could unleash the power of the atom to wipe ourselves out. The explosion at Chernobyl in the 90s and the destruction of the Fukushima nuclear plant by tidal wave in 2011 have shown people everywhere just what a large-scale nuclear war would mean: the earth would become uninhabitable. We fear that outcome a little less nowadays, for our greater fear now is the slower death of the gradual collapse of the planet through over-population, pollution, poisoned land, and undrinkable water resulting in the extinction of species, the loss of habitat, climate change and, in the end, an uninhabitable planet for healthy human beings.

Passages like Malachi and Luke 21 are not so much exact predictions of what will definitely happen – they are not a script for the last act of the human tragedy – but they are an urgent warning to humankind to recognise the seriousness of our situation. To read them this way is to take them seriously.

There's a second aspect to these readings and that's the strong, if surprising, sense of optimism within them. They carry the belief that there is fulfilment in the future.

Within all the Bible's apocalyptic literature there's an expression of faith that at the end of the world, as at the beginning of the world, there is not nothingness but God. These passages testify to the belief that the universe has a destination, a goal, an end outcome which is fulfilment in and with God. Teilhard de Chardin called this the Omega Point. De Chardin was a Jesuit paleontologist with an interest in the origin of human beings and their evolution, and this led him to think about our continuing evolution: if we have evolved to how we are now what are we continuing to evolve towards? His Omega point idea came from St Paul's image of fulfilment when God is our all in all. This is the goal of Judeo-Christian theology; it's what Christians believe the universe is moving towards. There's meaning and purpose to life.

Apocalyptic events – war and famine, plague, earthquake and fire – are not times of god-forsakenness but, the bible suggests, times for endurance through which we gain our souls.

I don't think anyone really enjoys reading these sections of the bible, but it is important that we take note of them, first because they are a timely wake-up call, a call to care for the planet, a call to care for each other, and second because they are a call to endure and pin our hope on God who comes again and again to lead God's people on, to the time and the place where the world regains its soul.

Soon, sooner than some of us want because time passes so quickly, we will be singing carols. I remembered one of them when we heard those words from Malachi because Malachi's words inspired the third verse of 'Hark the herald angels sing':-

Hail the heaven-born prince of peace!

Hail the sun of righteousness

Light and life to all he brings,

Risen with healing in his wings

And it is good, just before Advent begins, to be reminded that the king, whose coming among us we will remember on Christmas Day and whose reign we celebrate, comes to us, in Malachi's words, with the heat of a burning oven,

consuming the dross of careless worship that is divorced from the way we lead our lives

and challenging any of our slothfulness as disciples.

Apocalyptic literature with all its disturbing images spurs us to live lovingly, serve faithfully and love fervently.