

WHAT THE NEW COVENANT MEANS ⇒THE END OF ALL THINGS⇐

For most people in the Western world, the universe as we know it will continue for ever, or at least until the processes of Physics determine its collapse at a time so far off as to be of practical irrelevance. Within this framework mankind himself will continue to progress in knowledge and technological capability. Whether this development will lead to a bright future or to self-destruction is uncertain.

The New Testament and what preceded it knew nothing of the Physics of the universe, and so has nothing to say on the subject. As for mankind, it speaks of an end to life as we know it brought about by God's intervention in history. In its simplest form, Christ will return in a physical yet supernatural form to bring the existing world order to an end and start a new form of life for creation.

When Jesus was in Jerusalem with his disciples outside the temple, the disciples asked him: "What will be the signal for your coming and the end of the age?" (Matthew 24:3). Later, when Jesus went up into heaven following the resurrection, it was said: "This Jesus, who has been taken away from you up to heaven, will come in the same way as you have seen him go." (Acts 1:11). But his return would not be a secret, private, appearance. It would be visible to all. He said: "If they tell you, 'He is there in the desert', do not go out; or if they say, 'He is there in the inner room', do not believe it. Like lightening from the East, flashing as far as the West, will be the coming of the Son of Man." (Matthew 24:26-27).

The Book of Revelation, like parts of the gospels, puts the return of Christ into a background of disasters and strife on a world-wide scale. It speaks, for example, of the burning of a third of the earth, trees and grass. It describes something like a burning mountain hurled into the sea with the death of a third of the sea creatures and a massive destruction of ships. It describes something like a great star coming from the sky leading to the poisoning of rivers and the death of many people; and so on. (Revelation 8). One of these disasters was called "wormwood" in old English translations of the New Testament; in Russian it is translated as "Chernobyl". This gave many Russian Christians food for thought!

Whether these disasters should be taken as man-made, or natural and outside the control of man is uncertain. What is clear is that man is now capable of bringing such massive disasters upon himself with the greatest of ease. So unless we are to believe that man has reached a higher level of maturity in his dealings, it is difficult to suppose that he will not in time cause these disasters.

At another level, scientists are now more willing than they were a few decades ago to accept the possibility of massive natural disasters, such as collisions with other heavenly bodies, whether comets or asteroids. This change has come about as a result of the recent collision of a comet with Jupiter, and the recent growing acceptance of evidence that the dinosaurs were annihilated by some such disaster.

In the political field, there is tyranny, and there are battles between nations. In the Book of Revelation much of this is expressed in symbolism more easily recognised by the early church than by us. In all ages there have been Christians who have attempted to see in the details the events of their own day. We can only wait for events to unfold, and perhaps at the right time the interpretation will become obvious.

By looking at these details we should not be distracted from the message of the New Testament that the future of the world is in God's hands, that it is predetermined, at least in general terms, and that it is God Himself who will bring matters to a conclusion. The

re-creation of the nation of Israel after nearly two thousand years of dispersion is perhaps the most powerful sign of this.

So life as we know it will end; yet in another sense it will be a beginning: the beginning of a new age. Traditionally this has been called “heaven”, probably from the vision in Revelation of a new heaven and a new earth. (Revelation 21). A voice calls out: “Now at last God has his dwelling among men! He will dwell among them and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes; there shall be an end to death, and to mourning and crying and pain; for the old order has passed away!”

To describe “heaven” in meaningful terms can scarcely be an easy task. Any description would have to be in images or pictures. And so it is in the book of Revelation. Paul in writing to the Christians at Corinth says our “heavenly” bodies will be different from our earthly bodies. (1 Corinthians 15:35-57). Christ said that there would be no marriage in heaven. (Matthew 22:30). I am sure we all have our own ideas of what we would like heaven to be like, though with the concerns of everyday life now, I wonder how often we find time to think of this future.

Life with Christ now is just a little taste of the future. Perhaps we could be inspired to experience more of it now, and pass more of it on to others.