

ON BEING LEFT BEHIND¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the First Sunday in Advent, 1 December 2019

This morning's gospel sets the apocalyptic theme for Advent, the beginning of the church year. Although Advent prepares us for Christmas, the "coming" to which the name refers is not that of the Christ child but of the triumphant Christ at the end of time. In discussing the last times, Jesus uses two striking images. The first is the image of suddenness:

Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left.²

Two people are going about their ordinary business together, working in the fields, grinding meal, and suddenly, one of them is gone. To some Christians, this is a reference to what is known as the "Rapture" in which living Christians, along with resurrected dead believers will be caught up into the heavens to meet the Lord.³ That is why one of two is left. Bad luck for the one left behind. American evangelicals have created a whole literary genre of "Rapture novels" to discuss what might happen both to those caught up and to the survivors.⁴ However, the reference that Jesus makes to Noah may give us pause. In that story, the ones who are left are the saved persons in the Ark. The ones who are gone are swept to a watery grave. Not quite what the Rapture believers think.

The second, and related, image is that of preventable surprise. This is the image of the thief in the night:

But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into.⁵

Jesus is not the only one to use this image. Paul and Peter use the analogy in their letters and it also appears twice in the book *Revelation*.⁶ The insecurity generated by the image of the thief is in contrast to some of the other images of today's readings. It stands sharply against the idea of the city of Jerusalem 'built as a city that is firmly bound together'.⁷ How different also is this image from Isaiah's mountain of the Lord to which all peoples shall come for justice.⁸ The contrast between the images of our readings can only serve to heighten our perception of what the image of the thief in the night means.

¹ Readings: Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:9-14; Matthew 24:36-44

² Matthew 24:37-40

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rapture>

⁴ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rapture_\(novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rapture_(novel))

⁵ Matthew 24:43-44

⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5:2 (NRSV) For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 2 Peter 3:10 (NRSV) But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed. Revelation 3:3 (NRSV) Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you. Revelation 16:15 (NRSV) ("See, I am coming like a thief! Blessed is the one who stays awake and is clothed, not going about naked and exposed to shame.")

⁷ Psalm 122:3

⁸ Isaiah 2:1-4

Many of us will have experienced returning home only to find that your house has been broken into. Bev and I have had three such experiences. It is quite shocking; the feeling of violation, the frantic checking to discover what has been taken, the loss of treasured objects. There may also be the conversation later with the old lady across the road who saw the thief enter but did not want to interfere. Our real-life experience makes the use of this image to describe the coming of the Lord quite disturbing.

These references to the end of all things are very difficult for the modern mind to grasp. The concept certainly does not conform to any scientific view we might have about either environmental disaster or cosmic collapse. The closest possible event may be the sometimes-quoted possibility of collision with a comet or an asteroid. Even then we would expect a warning. We also have different ideas about time itself.

Worse than that, however, is the bad press associated with those apocalyptic sects that appear from time to time and predict the end. Such fundamentalism is not the kind of theology we either espouse or respect. We should not, however, think that it has no relevance to that part of the church in which we live. Apocalyptic teaching figures largely in the prevailing theology of the Diocese of Sydney and colours much of its approach to social and cultural affairs. Its concentration on a better time in the future and its belief that such a future is imminent lead it to avoid constructive involvement in the affairs of state and society.⁹ Instead, there is a sectarian insularity and a tendency to moral arrogance.

Thus, today's gospel is unsettling in two ways. First, we don't have any expectation of an apocalypse of the kind imagined in the text. Second, the images themselves are inconsistent with what we do expect. When we think of an apocalypse, we might be immediately reminded of the use of the word by some of those involved in recent bushfires. They described their experience using that word and suggesting the gates of hell. We might also think of the approaching climate catastrophe that we, or our children, will experience. How will we resolve this problem?

To do this, we will need a more sophisticated approach than that exhibited by our rapture-fascinated colleagues. The images in the gospel reading suggest forms of violence; a person swept away, a thief breaking in and possibly assaulting us. This might suggest that we should consider the central violent act of the gospels: the death of Jesus, an exercise in state violence publicly exhibited to achieve its greatest effect.

A comment on a Girardian website notes that, effectively, Jesus was the one left behind. In a rising tide of violence, everyone, as in the Noah story, was swept away. This includes not only the officials and the crowd but also the disciples. Only Jesus resisted the violence, he did not respond in kind.

Jesus is so alone ... that he even cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" That's being *left behind!* ... ¹⁰

There are also other forms of being left behind, forms much closer to the way in which we live. In the online journal, *Eureka Street*, Andrew Hamilton commented during this week on the

⁹ A good account of the effect in the Diocese of Sydney of apocalyptic teaching of the kind called 'dispensationalism' is in: William James Lawton, *The Better Time to Be: Utopian Attitudes to Society Among Sydney Anglicans, 1885 to 1914*, Kensington, New South Wales University Press, 1990.

¹⁰ http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-a/advent1a_2001_ser/

Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins,¹¹ who wrote a poem on the unemployed called “Tom’s Garland”.¹² In this poem Hopkins imagines a hierarchical world with the divinely ordained sovereign at the top and the day-labourer at the bottom. Such a view was consistent with his conservative 19th century background of the prosperous middle class, of an Oxford education heavily influenced by the Oxford Movement and John Henry Newman. I won’t read the poem here. Like most of Hopkins’ work, it needs to be read and reread to be properly absorbed.

Instead, I will quote from the notes that he wrote to explain it.¹³ Hopkins refers to Paul’s comments on the way in which the whole body fits together. The sovereign is the head and the day labourer the foot. Yet they all have a common honour, which they share with the other members.

But [the lowest] place still shares the common honour, and if it wants one advantage, glory or public fame, makes up for it by another, ease of mind, absence of care ...

Yet, everything is not so rosy, even through Hopkins’ conditioned eyes:

I remember that this is all very well for those who are in, however low in, the Commonwealth and share in any way the common weal; but that the curse of our times is that many do not share it, that they are outcasts from it and have neither security nor splendour; that they share care with the high and obscurity with the low, but wealth or comfort with neither.

If we wish to make sense of the Kingdom of God and its ultimate fulfilment, we will need to remember that we do not simply wait for some future “rapture” to bring everything to fruition. As Jesus frequently said, the Kingdom has already come. We need to be sure that we participate in it, by rejecting violence and caring particularly for those left behind.

¹¹ Andrew Hamilton, “Gerard Manley Hopkins on advocacy and pests”, Vol 29 No 23
https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article/gerard-manley-hopkins-on-advocacy-and-pests?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Eureka%20Street%20Daily%20-%20Tuesday%2026%20November%202019&utm_content=Eureka%20Street%20Daily%20-%20Tuesday%2026%20November%202019+CID_731b687fbdf6eee6f945cc04e4822291&utm_source=Jescom%20Newsletters&utm_term=READ%20MORE

¹² <https://www.bartleby.com/122/42.html>

¹³ <https://www.bartleby.com/122/1000.html#42>