

We Are Living in the Final Times with Fr Richard ffield OSB Saturday 5th December at 11:00am

What does it mean to live in the Final Times, when Divine Selection has replaced Natural Selection as the driver of evolution?

Are we nearly there yet?

Parents will no doubt be looking forward to hearing this question as they drive with the children to join the extended family for Christmas, pandemic restrictions permitting.

I received my first Christmas card this morning, so we must be nearly there.

We are looking forward in Advent to celebrating the coming of Jesus. But are we talking about looking back 2000 years ago and celebrating an event that took place then in a stable in Bethlehem? Or are we talking about the coming of Jesus into our own hearts? Or are we looking forward to the coming of Jesus at the end of time, whether we think of it in terms of the Last Judgement or whatever?

Teilhard de Chardin calls that time Omega Point. The end point. He talks of it as a time when the world will be in a fit state for Jesus Christ to hand it back to his Father.

Here are two prophecies of what that time will be like. One was written two and three quarter millennia ago and the other was written 75 years ago.

The first, as you may have guessed, is another passage by the prophet Isaiah, this time in Chapter 11: a scion thrusts from his roots:

A shoot springs from the stock of Jesse,
on him the spirit of the Lord rests,
a spirit of wisdom and insight,
a spirit of counsel and power,
a spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord.

(The fear of the Lord is his breath.)

He does not judge by appearances,
he gives no verdict on hearsay,
but judges the wretched with integrity,
and with equity gives a verdict for the poor of the land.

His word is a rod that strikes the ruthless,
his sentences bring death to the wicked.

Integrity is the loincloth round his waist,
faithfulness the belt about his hips.

The wolf lives with the lamb,
the panther lies down with the kid,
calf and lion feed together,
with a little boy to lead them.

The cow and the bear make friends,
their young lie down together.

The lion eats straw like the ox.

The infant plays over the cobra's hole;
into the viper's lair

the young child puts his hand.

They do no hurt, no harm,
on all my holy mountain,

for the country is filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters swell the sea.

That day, the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples. It will be sought out by the nations

What a mind blowing prospect! A prophecy of the coming of the Messiah and of what the world will be like when the Messiah comes. A world of justice and peace.

But, we respond, he has come, 2000 years ago, and the world is NOT like that. There are wars and violence all over the world and, even in this country, any sort of justice is now often delayed for a couple of years or more.

Here's another prophecy; from Field Marshal Alanbrooke written at the end of the Second World War in his diary. He had been chief of the general staff for most of the war. He wrote: "I am not a highly religious individual according to many people's outlook, I am, however, convinced that there is a God, all-powerful, looking after the destiny of this world. I had little doubt about this before the war started, but this war has convinced me more than ever of this truth. Again and again during the last six years I have seen His guiding hand, guiding and controlling the destiny of this world towards that final and definite destiny which He has ordained.

"The suffering and agony of war must exist gradually to educate us up to the fundamental law of 'loving our neighbour as ourselves'. When that lesson has been learned, then war will cease to exist. We are, however, many centuries from such a state of affairs. Many more wars and much suffering is still required before we finally learn our lesson. Humanity on this world is, however, still young; there are many millions of years to run during which perfection will be attained. For the present we can do no more than go on striving to improve more friendly relations towards those that surround us." That's the prophecy of a soldier.

He implies that Jesus, the Messiah, did not wave a magic wand to change the world into the state that Isaiah had prophesied. Sure, he said "The Kingdom of God is here, it is among you" but he also told us that it is up to us to preach it, to the ends of the world and – as St Francis reminded us – not so much in words as by our own actions.

For the past millions of years, living beings have evolved through the mechanism of Natural Selection that Charles Darwin propounded. The mechanism of Natural Selection, sometimes referred to as the Survival of the Fittest, is death. It is the weakest who die first, who die before they have a chance to reproduce, so that Natural Selection ensures the survival and reproduction of those most fitted for strong and abundant life, the Survival of the Fittest. Death is often a result of power being exercised by stronger living beings who are able, either to eat or destroy those weaker than themselves, so Natural Selection takes place because the fitter can run away faster from those who are bigger or stronger than themselves and it is those who survive.

Teilhard de Chardin described humankind as evolution become conscious of itself. But It was still the temptation to power that led Adam and Eve astray. The power that the wisdom of God would give, was what Satan promised to Eve. So perhaps we can think of Original Sin as the thirst for power that shows itself in pride – thinking of myself as better than others; in greed – wanting more and more for myself; in the satisfaction that some find in abusing, raping or torturing others; in multinationals buying up their competitors so that they can exploit cheap labour and maximise their profits at the expense of others; in stealing from others; in keeping for themselves the fruits of the resources of a country rather than distributing them to others. That is what is slowing down the coming of the Kingdom – but it is not stopping it.

Moses taught that we should love our neighbour – and this included not just the person who lived next door to us but also the widow and orphan: we should care for them as well as

ourselves. So it was no longer the individual but the family, the village, the tribe, the nation who were fittest, in the sense of being able to defend themselves from outside influences, now who survived.

But two thousand years ago, two things happened that had never happened before, which disturbed this process of natural selection, the survival of the fittest.

The mechanism, so to speak, of Natural Selection is death. But Jesus, in his Resurrection (without which, Paul reminds us, our faith is a waste of time) has destroyed death and thereby destroyed the mechanism of Natural Evolution, Natural Selection.

The second thing that happened was that Jesus said "Love your enemies. You have heard that it is written 'Love your neighbour as yourself' but I say to you Love your enemies."

This doesn't mean like them – or they wouldn't be enemies - but it does mean thinking of him as more important than yourself. Why is he behaving like this? Why does he see the situation differently?

If everyone in the world – or, rather when everyone in the world – treats everybody else as more important than himself, then we will have reached the world outlined in those prophecies that I read.

So, in the place of Natural Selection, Divine Selection, in which every human being has infinite value, which is NOT destroyed by natural death and decay. Increasingly we are seeing that this applies to our created world as well, as outlined by Pope Francis in Laudato Si. That is what Jesus Christ, incarnate, in his mystical body, in the church, in you and me, is witnessing to, when we speak out against oppression, against euthanasia, against abortion, when we devote precious resources to hospitals, to free schools, to orphanages, to homes for old people and in aid to countries overseas.

2000 years ago, there was no OXFAM, there was no Red Cross, there were no orphanages. Many, if not most of these, have had Christian beginnings. There has been progress. It is not all progress. In the last twenty years, the gap between the richest and the poorest has been widening again – in the previous 40 years it had been shrinking. But there is progress.

So in this season of Advent we might look at how we are playing our part in this coming, this coming to be, of Omega Point, of the state of affairs in those two prophecies, the Parousia, the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, when he will hand back our perfect world to his Father and we shall go on to enjoy eternal life with Him.

This is the Good News that Jesus told us, he depends on us, to spread to the ends of the world. Each of us has a part to play in this process. Our part is hundreds of little acts of kindness, of patience, of forgiveness, of generosity, of unselfishness; all of them acts of love and all of them, above all, with joy.

So we are living in the Final Times, the End Times. Jesus warned us that there would be wars, persecutions, disasters and distractions and he warned us not to keep saying 'Oh, it's the end of the world'. St Paul in his letters and St John in the Book of Revelation, wrote of us living in the final times but they thought that the end of the world was quite close and would come in a generation or so. St Paul revised his ideas as time grew on but 2000 years later, we are still waiting.

If you take a distance of 100 miles, half way to London from Ampleforth, a couple of hours driving say, as equivalent to the 13.5 billion years since the Big Bang, then the 2000 years since

the time of Jesus Christ, is about 1 inch. So the question 'Are we nearly there yet' perhaps takes on a different perspective.