

The Presence Of The End

We Christians, along with many other believers, think that the world we live in had its beginning in the mind of God, who brought it into being as its Creator. We also have a conviction that it has an end, towards which it is travelling under the providence of the same God, who will bring it to its terminus in the quality of Judge.

Apparent Permanence

Sometimes we look at the world and feel it will never change. The quality of timelessness can invest a view or an experience, and for a short while we can get a glimpse of eternity. Usually it passes with the intervention of a cloud or the summons of a bell or a voice, and we know once more that we are in transit, caught up in a process, sometimes frighteningly fast. The onset of this feeling can be accompanied by anxiety or even terror, and that is where we find our way into the Biblical world of *apocalypse*, which puts us into the presence of the ending of all things - including ourselves. Because this is an onset of truth - feeling immortal and unchangeable is the fiction - we can be challenged and unnerved by it. So the Church wants to speak to us about this feeling, and encourage us to be trustful and positive.

Praying For Earthly Needs

To pray about the little needs of every day is natural and holy. We ask God to care for us in these temporary situations, we pray that we may not be overwhelmed by small cares and local difficulties: we take refuge from their power by breathing for a while the open air of the eternal, where no more pain will threaten us, and our lives will be free. This practice of the presence of God gives us the way to respond when we feel the power of time too keenly; because the end of our lives is also our point of passage into the eternal life, which God enjoys, and we long for. That's why *thy kingdom come* is such a good daily prayer for us; it gives us the positive way to experience the ticking of the clock, which by itself can become truly sinister. I remember a holy old Geordie woman to whom I was taking communion in her bedroom. She looked at the coat which hung on the back of the door, and said *Eeeh, look at that manky ould coat. Worra disgrace!* I said, *Shall we find you a new one for the winter?* And she said, very firmly, *Noo sweet'art - a'd never*

get the use of it! I remember this sturdy realism with pleasure, because she said it without a catch in her voice. She'd got quite used to thinking she wasn't really long for this world, and her indifference to the state of her clothes was totally right. Realism is very comforting once it's natural and not assumed or faked. I know a lady who performs a small local service by filling all her friends' funeral plans into a little notebook, which everyone can consult when the day approaches. It isn't morbid, but a sign that, with God on our side, we can afford the truth.

Whose Going To Be Laughing?

There's a nice old saying: *When I was born, I cried, and everyone else laughed. When I die, everyone will cry, but I shall laugh.* When you think about it, that means that we should all be laughing on a funeral day; the one who has died has passed from the power of evil. The Mass says *You free us at last from sin, as we return to the dust from which we came.* This is a marvellous reflection: how much sorrow and limitation we shall be leaving behind us! And how we are going to love the liberation which will be ours when we finally glimpse the glory of God, and accede to our place in him! Only those blinded and obsessed by the little lottery of this life could be sorry for the dead. Their transition is from the vale of tears into the fulness of life, and for all our medical advances, valued as they are, few of us approach the end without the knowledge that there is a right time to be done with this life. I know it is very hard to hear the "herald and champion" of death - sickness - bringing us a grim message. But once we have accepted it, there are visibly things that we shall not be sorry to say goodbye to: the insoluble dilemma or tax-return, the leaky roof or heart-valve, the trapped relationship or nerve, the labours of maintenance and the finding of ways and means. As the textile of this life unravels, it gets harder and harder to hold things together. But if we think of this disturbing dissolution as part of the plan, and accept that the next step will be one that leads us to light and ultimate healing, perhaps we may cut our losses, shed our manky ould coat and the rest of our borrowed feathers without overwhelming regret, and trust our eternal, ever-loving Father, and go with grace. *Fr Philip*