

# THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

## Apocalypse

Sometimes we are so full of the sense of fulfilment and happiness that it dominates our view of the world. Sometimes we see nothing but hopelessness, a dreary history of failure and lost causes. But sometimes we get a whiff of something else: a feeling that life is after all *finite*, that the long story of the world is hurtling towards some kind of sticking-point, a moment of judgment.

### This Can't Go On For Ever

It isn't like a moment of *despair*, although it must involve the doom of most future plans. It isn't that we feel too *weary* to go on, or that we are suddenly gripped by fear. There has to be a sense that the world we live in might be a shuttered, partially-sighted environment, and that some day – perhaps very soon – the blinkers will be removed, the lights will go up, and we shall *see* at last what we are about. In the Gospel Jesus murmurs these thoughts in a quiet place, and we remember the line: *It is when everything is quiet and peaceful that the worst will suddenly happen, as labour-pains burst suddenly upon a pregnant woman*. Of course, a pregnant woman knows that this is going to happen, and we too are well aware that there is in our world a process of dissolution, making everything temporary and provisional. We know this, but evade its truth, pretending that we can command stability and permanence. Still there come moments, however brief, when the worrying truth dawns on us. This is the moment when we sniff the air of *apocalypse*.

### The Powers Of Heaven Will Be Shaken

These *powers* are not the same thing as the power of God. They are the angelic powers the Jews believed governed the space between heaven and earth. Sometimes they were worshipped as divine (as pagans made gods of the sun and the moon). Even these, however, obedient to God's judgment on all creation, are to be "shaken". If we have given God's place to any lesser power or possession, our fake sense of security will be similarly "shaken". Apocalypse demands the final truth, a breaking-in of heavenly reality that sweeps away everything false, every lesser perception. Even the most spiritual of earthlings will not be spared this fearful experience: it is the common heritage of human kind that we should be silenced before the oncoming revelation of God.

### The Gathering Of The Chosen

"The Son of Man will send the angels to gather his chosen from the four winds"; this cosmic errand will be necessary because of the scattering of the Church. We may remember the scattering of the seed when it is sown, which makes it into a harvest. Jesus goes on to draw attention to the fig-tree's budding as a sign of the summer (the time when all growing things reach their full growth, the moment of ripeness). This should stop us assuming that the passage is directed merely to times of distress; instead, it is for high summer, for the moment of earthly perfection. When you see the trees in their high splendour, that's the moment to remember judgment. This doesn't give us any instant encouragement to face the sweeping-away of the world we've known. If it were already falling to pieces, it might be easier. But see how Jesus invites us to think these "unseasonable" thoughts: there is nothing we rely on more completely than the rising of tomorrow's sun (though we can't prove it will happen); and we're used to dismissing all kinds of messages as "just words". To be Christians today, however, we must contemplate the *passing away* of the sun and moon, the reliable heavens and the solid earth; what will *remain* is Jesus' word alone. How typical of Mark's paradoxical mind! He is liberating us, in advance of the certain passing-away of our world. As it is almost our last visit to this year's Gospel, we should take it to heart, and show by the free generosity of our lives that we have been listening.

*Fr Philip*