

19th July 2021

Nigh

“The end of all things is at hand.”

Bible, 1 Peter 4:7

Some years ago, walking through Glasgow, I heard the loud voice of a street-corner preacher. He was haranguing passers-by with some vehemence, an archetypal, open-air evangelist, one hand holding a big, black bible, and the other hand gesticulating wildly. He didn't need a microphone. He didn't appear to need an audience either, lost as he was in the passion of his task. Beside him was a “sandwich-board”, on which was printed in bold lettering on both sides the slogan, beloved of the placard-bearing religious fanatic: “The end is nigh.”

Although “nigh” is a biblical word, the phrase doesn't appear in this form in the Authorised (King James) version of our Bible. The closest equivalents are from the prophet Joel: “The day of the Lord ... is nigh at hand”; in Luke's Gospel, “The Kingdom of God is nigh at hand”; and in the First Letter of Peter, “The end of all things is at hand”. The early Church lived with the expectation that Christ would come soon in “the end times”. So “the end is nigh” was a warning: you'd better be ready! Christ is coming to claim his own. And if you're not one of those, you're in serious trouble.

There are those who, like the preacher on that street-corner, see warning signs that we are now in those end times. For them, the warnings are real and important. They are, of course, entitled to their opinions – though these are apocalyptic expectations I just don't get. But where I *do* subscribe to the “end is nigh” idea is in the recognition that the thread of life is very thin. We live with our mortality every waking moment. We always have and always will. So, “the end is nigh” for all of us – even now.

A good friend, sadly no longer with us, lived for many years with cancer. When people asked her how she was, she didn't reply with anything like, “It's good to be alive”, but with an affirmation from the monks of old: “This is a good day to die”. She'd learned to live with the truth that the end was nigh for her, and she had to be ready. Might we learn from her, and recognise from her wisdom that a ranting, vociferous, Glasgow street-corner preacher might well be right?

A prayer for today

Lord, if the end of all things is at hand, help me to face it well. Amen

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