

SCHOLAR'S CORNER

I know we say “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again,” but honestly I say the third part of that without any sincerity because the ideas of associated with the Second Coming — the Antichrist, Armageddon, people on Judgment Day being sent (some of them) to burn in a lake of fire forever — all these things just turn me off completely, and I cannot whip up any enthusiasm or desire for the Second Coming. It all seems unreal — far from reality as I know it — and frankly frightening and unappealing. Can you help me make peace with the belief in the Second Coming and find something positive about it?

That Jesus will come again to our world, this time in glory instead of in weakness and humility like the first time, and will make everything right, has been a core Christian belief from the beginning of the Christian Movement. The most likely translation of the early Christian Aramaic saying “Maranatha” is “Our Lord, come!”

Now you may be put off by the traditional imagery of the Second Coming—the picture of Christ, sword in hand, leading an army of similarly armed angels down from the sky and defeating all the evil people of the world in a bloody battle to be followed by Judgment Day, with Christ serving as the Judge and all people who have ever lived be sent to heaven or hell, depending on their deeds. These traditional mental pictures may not appeal to you, yet they have brought comfort to thousands over the years.

Pain, sorrow and injustice are inescapable facts of life, and the thought that someday all your acts of kindness and love will be appreciated and rewarded and that heartless men of violence will no longer be able to hurt the weak and defenseless—these thoughts have sometimes been the only things

keeping people going during great suffering.

The belief in the Second Coming of Christ among other things means that all our efforts for God—despite setbacks and apparent failures—are worth it. In the end, goodness will prevail and all our efforts will have not been for naught. The Second Coming therefore is about hope, that however bleak things may look now, we can continue in our service of God because we believe that ultimately, somehow, things will turn out right. When we get tired or discouraged, we sometimes need that note of hope to keep going.

Ideas about the Second Coming and Judgment Day, the Millennium of Peace, and so on are expressions of the conviction that despite all the wickedness and injustice, God is good, God is loving, God is just. We don't know exactly why the universe is the way it is—with so much pain and death and a lack of justice, rhyme or reason—but the doctrine of the Second Coming expresses our determined hope and conviction that sorrow and pain and death are not the last word. Somehow, somewhere, someday things will be as they

ought to be. Will it happen in our lifetime? Probably not. But we live in hope, hope that someday what Verna Dozier called “the Dream of God” for humanity will come true.

Another thing the Second Coming reminds us of is that we ought not to think too highly of our accomplishments, that we have created a perfect world or a perfect Church. The Church is not the Kingdom, despite the repeated reemergence of Christian triumphalism. The Return of Christ comes against our self-satisfied patting ourselves on the back that we have gotten things right where other groups of Christians have gotten things wrong, against every “realized eschatology” that says we have “arrived.” I am reminded of the “Manifest Sons of God” Pentecostal group that believed they had already experienced Resurrection and were already living in their glorified bodies. According to the tract of theirs, if they had enough faith, they would never get sick and never die. Nice idea, but not very realistic.

A final thought: that the Kingdom is “not yet” and always remains “not yet” also means that God has something bet-

ter for us than the existence we experience. The world is not enough. The belief in the Second Coming says, “This is not all that God has in store for you.” We are not satisfied with things the way they are, with all too much suffering and injustice. Well, the Second Coming of Christ means God is not satisfied with the way things are either. It is not O.K. that there is so much suffering, so many tears, so much heartache. No, this is not how things should be. God, we believe, cries with us when we suffer grief and other hurts. God is not less compassionate than we are, less moved by human suffering than we are. God is as outraged by injustice and misery as we are—probably more so.

From this perspective, the Second Coming of Christ is all about looking forward with hope and optimism because we have a future, God's future. Someday, somehow, we will get to the Promised Land. We are a people of hope who are always looking forward. That is what the Second Coming of Christ is all about.

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