

# THE APOCALYPTIC WITH A DIFFERENCE

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THE TERM 'APOCALYPTIC' is perhaps less familiar, in general theological discourse, than its relative 'eschatology'. But the ethos that they share may serve as a point of departure for an attempt to clarify the ideas surrounding them and to arrive at a fresh, if not altogether novel, understanding of the truth<sup>1</sup> of the apocalyptic that will have unsuspected consequences for Christian living. The apocalyptic, after all, is part of the salvific message, though perhaps not all scholars<sup>2</sup> appreciate it enough to emphasize it. All the more valuable, then, is the way that Raymond Brown has driven home this point, particularly for our age:

To contemporary culture that idolizes science and calculable knowledge, apocalyptic is an enduring witness to a reality that defies all our measurement; it testifies to another world that escapes all scientific gauges and finds expression in symbols and visions .... On a psychological level Jung sought an entry into that world through symbols. On a religious level mystics have offered insight.

Moreover, he adds, 'Liturgy properly understood brings ordinary believers into contact with this heavenly reality'.<sup>3</sup> Brown's approach is a significant departure from either curious inquiry or feverish anxiety about the so-called apocalyptic catastrophe at the end of time.

His surprising reference to liturgy in relation to the apocalyptic is evocative of the unusual events at Jesus' first public appearance at a Jewish liturgy in his home town (Luke 4:16–21). Reading from Isaiah

<sup>1</sup> The genre of the apocalyptic has often appealed more to the fearful and gullible than its latent truth has to more thoughtful. New Testament scholars, according to Michael Stone, hope to reverse this trend. See Nidhani de Andrado, 'Apocalyptic Eschatology and the "Day of the Lord" Concept', *Vagdevi: A Journal of Religious Reflection*, 4 (2010), 15.

<sup>2</sup> There are exceptions: see, for example, *The Common Catechism: A Book of Christian Faith*, edited by Johannes Feiner and Lukas Vischer (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2000), 810. See also *The Common Catechism*, edited by Feiner and Vischer, 414.

about the jubilee year Jesus proclaimed its immediacy at that very place and time. One can appreciate the truth of what Raymond Brown has said in another context: 'Jesus had a strong apocalyptic view: the kingdom/rule of God was present in his ministry; decision was imperative in face of a divine invitation that would not be repeated'.<sup>4</sup> Before Jesus came to take such a public apocalyptic stance, urged by his self-understanding, he grew up nourished in that spirit by his reading of the scriptures (John 5:39), not unlike his predecessor John the Baptist (John 1:19–27). The Hebrew scriptures are saturated with the idea that in human life there are times and seasons, each with its own appropriate way of living (Ecclesiastes 3:1–8). And, further, they look to the Day of Yahweh when God's cosmic dominion will become manifest by means of God's saving and judging power, in the words of the prophets, with various emphases according to their varying times.

Jesus went beyond these prophecies, in line with the Baptist's preaching (Matthew 3:1–2; 4:17), bringing the whole prophetic tradition to a unique climax and presenting God as recognizably active in the midst of the people. Time and again he spoke about the closeness of the Kingdom and the signs of the times (Mark 1:15; Matthew 16:3). What is more, he expected his audience to read the signs in their own time, recognise their meaning and reshape their lives accordingly (Luke 12:54–59). All this news of revelation in history is very near to us, thanks to the Christian scriptures (Acts 1:6–7; Hebrews 1:1–2; Revelation 1:3); and it ought to be on our lips and in our hearts for us to put into practice (Romans 10:6–8).

***Down-to-earth,  
apocalyptic  
living in truth***

Apocalyptic living is the way of life that flows from such an awareness of the new, open-ended Reign of God inaugurated by Jesus. The terrifying vision of the divinely ordained end-times that gave rise to unearthly apocalyptic literature must find its sober realisation in down-to-earth, apocalyptic living in truth. The phrase 'apocalyptic living' does not appear in the gospels but it is true to their spirit: it is a sensible response, here and now, to the eschatological message that Jesus urges on us in word and deed, with his parables and in his person. It is simply following the one who not only said, 'I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled!' (Luke 12:49), but also lived daringly according to his

<sup>4</sup> Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 506.

words (Luke 13:32–33; John 5:17), inviting others to go along with him (Matthew 12:30). Those who dare follow him must have ears to hear the agraphon: ‘He who is near me is near the fire, and he who is far from me is far from the kingdom’.<sup>5</sup>

### ***A Parable of Apocalyptic Living***

In April 2002 the magazine *Biografía: Crónica de los Tiempos* published a ‘Letter Written in 2070’ composed in the words of a man of fifty but whose ‘appearance is of somebody of 85’. It describes the terrible results of a future global water shortage:

... all the rivers, lakes, dams and underground water beds are either dry or contaminated .... I cannot help feeling guilty, because I belong to the generation *who contributed to the destruction of the environment or simply did not take into account all the warning signs*.<sup>6</sup>

Such is, *mutatis mutandis*, the case with the kingdom of God as Jesus revealed it in many of his parables. Like this modern parable, the gospel parable of the six brothers (Luke 16:19–31)<sup>7</sup> drives home the same point on an eschatological level, as it describes the tragic reversals experienced by people who carry on living as they please, unmindful of what lies ahead of them. The rich man Dives, after he dies, finds himself in Hades faced with the revelation that he is irreversibly cut off from Paradise, whereas the poor beggar Lazarus rests on the bosom of Abraham. Dives wants to save his five brothers from the same disaster and asks Abraham to send Lazarus to them and warn them. But his wish is refused: for God has sent them excellent messengers in the prophets and they had better listen to those messengers. Here is the lesson for the story’s audience: if it is too late for the rich man to regret his past, it is *high time to act* for those like him, symbolized by his siblings. The picture of Hades in this eschatological scenario ought to bring an end to thoughtless living and convert it into

<sup>5</sup> See Robert M. Grant and D. N. Freedman, *The Secret Sayings of Jesus* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1993), 180.

<sup>6</sup> Widely available on the internet in the form of a PowerPoint presentation created by Ria Ellwanger. English version downloaded from <http://myepinoy.files.wordpress.com/2007/06/lifeintheyear-2070.ppt>, accessed 9 November 2012. Here and elsewhere the presentation is, probably wrongly, attributed to the former Indian president Dr A. P. J. Abdul Kalam.

<sup>7</sup> See Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1975), 186. Jeremias gives the parable, more usually known as Dives and Lazarus, this name and focuses on its particular thrust. See also David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989), 145–150.

a committed way of life that is interiorly apocalyptic in its own right.<sup>8</sup> Whoever has been ignoring the grace of the present era, with its telling signs, had better change direction and act to avoid the consequences.

### ***The Apocalyptic vis-à-vis the Eschatological***

Such prophetic parables prodding the unwilling to act were, however, not the first that Jesus told. They came only after his parabolic teaching about the old order yielding place to the new. In his first parables he announced the Good News and called for immediate, appropriate action. What such positive action entails—and this, for me, distinguishes



*Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham, from a medieval psalter*

the apocalyptic from the eschatological<sup>9</sup>—will, I hope, emerge in what follows. Only when action was not forthcoming did Jesus tell parables that were disturbing to those who had failed to answer his clear call. To appreciate the urgency of this call to action one needs to go back to the sources, beyond the traditional interpretations of these parables. For there lies the original force of the parables,<sup>10</sup> which is more relevant today than we might suspect. It will catch our attention only if we live in a biblical awareness of the explosive fullness of time in our own age.

<sup>8</sup> There are several other warning parables and sayings with the same import, such as those of the children in the marketplace, the rich fool, the nocturnal burglar, the flood and the talents in Luke 7:31–35; 12:16–20, 39–40; 17:26–27; 19:11–27.

<sup>9</sup> See my 'Apocalyptic Sources of Religious Life', *Review for Religious*, 43 (1984), 192–193.

<sup>10</sup> The synoptics agree on this, though there is growing variation in the apocalyptic outlook from Mark through Matthew to Luke. See D. N. Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), volume 1, 290.

All the parables disclose the Abba-God of Jesus initiating an altogether new action in the world, comparable to God's previous interventions and yet unparalleled (Hebrews 1:1–2), and many of them highlight the beginning of the end-times and look forward to the dawn of the new. For example, the synoptics' parable of the budding fig tree (Mark 13:28) pictures the growth of summer and parallels it with the onset of the new salvific time, taking us back to Joel's prophecy (Joel 2:22) and yet, incredibly, taking us forward! When a denuded, wintry tree puts forth leaves from its twigs we sense the summer is near and plan summer activities. Anyone who has ears to hear the parable can recognise in the joyous and surprising events surrounding Christ a sign of coming blessing, and respond suitably. This is what Mary did, giving expression to her foresight in her prayer song (Luke 1:46–55) and in bold action (John 2:1–5). Like Mary, though more reflexively, we should retell and relive the parable of the fig tree, or of the new garment or the new wine (Mark 2:21–22)—this is, indeed, to be apocalyptic-minded.

### ***Apocalyptic Exuberance***

The Good News found a ready, if only incipient, acceptance among simple, marginalised people (Luke 4:18–22a; 19:37–38; 21:37–38) who heard Jesus speak of the blessings offered by God, not only hereafter but here and now (Matthew 5:1–8). His insistence on the immediacy of heavenly blessing in the very midst of the anxieties of humdrum life strikes the apocalyptic keynote in his eschatological message about the reign of God. He proved his vision through corresponding apocalyptic works (Luke 7:22; John 14:11), fulfilling and going beyond what had been prophesied (Isaiah 35:5–6). To his delight the simple people not only heard his good news but also shared in it; they gladly blazed a trail towards the end-times (Matthew 13:10–12, 16–17; Luke 5:17–26; 21:1–4) by their faith in God's new work, which led them to a radical change of heart and resulted in joyous life. Apocalyptic vision is usually seen in terms of distant cosmic calamities heralding God's final victory, but here is a timely, inner apocalyptic exuberance that overflows with joy.

Such is the thrust of the twin parables of the treasure in the field and the pearl (Matthew 13:44–46). The finder of the kingdom is like a person who chances upon a long-sought discovery and is overwhelmed with superabundant joy. The joy of those who are surprised by the reality of the kingdom is not and cannot be contained like ordinary joy: it is so intoxicating that it even overtakes onlookers and outsiders.

That is what happened to Matthew, in the midst of his money-making domain, when he was bidden by Jesus to follow him; later he threw a big, generous dinner for Jesus and everyone he cared about, without considering any social distinction (Matthew 9:9–13).

Such a joyous fellowship in eating and drinking was to become characteristic of the followers of Jesus, as they were noticed to let the rules of fasting and eating common among the Pharisees slip. When some people were scandalized, Jesus told his questioning parable of wedding guests (Mark 2:19). The time they lived in, he pointed out, was like that of the wedding party: who could fast as long as the bridegroom was around (Mark 2:18–20)? Another occasion of contagious joy was when the crowds began singing hosannas to Christ at his entry into Jerusalem, sensing that this was a special moment for the coming kingdom of God (Matthew 21:15–16). Once seized by such joy, who would part with it? What hindrance could separate us from it? Who would not act on it so that it would last and not be lost for any reason (Romans 8:35–39)? Jesus complimented such blessed souls and held them as exemplars of new life.

### ***Apocalyptic Dutifulness***

Alongside the spontaneous joy that breaks with the past because of the touch or tug of the surprising Spirit (Luke 10:17–22), there is also the more routine but equally genuine sort that flows with the regular rhythm of living and working. Having known the irruption of God's reign, our daily lives ought to be lived in God's service, in the spirit of the parable of the dutiful servants (Luke 17:7–10), who do their regular work and have the good sense to obey their master's orders. Such servants do not expect thanks and cannot imagine being rewarded any further by their good master. Yet this is what will happen in God's Kingdom, as Jesus visualises in the parable of the faithful servant (Luke 12:42–44). If servants do their work faithfully even when their master is away, when he returns to find them at their post they will be rewarded with greater responsibility and overwhelmed with happiness. The parable of watchful servants (Luke 12:35–37) goes one better. A day will come when all the servants' eager watchfulness in their master's service will be more than rewarded. For the master, happily returning from a wedding party to find his servants ready to welcome him, will sit them down at table and serve them!

For us, living in end-times whose end is not within sight, the point of such parables of service—including that of three talented servants

(Matthew 25:14–30)—is to inject and project the joyful anticipation of the future into the routine present. If we act on it we will bring restful contentment in the present and serene hope for the future into our daily round of work, here and now. Such joy in duty must be recognised as an apocalyptic trait of everyday life in the eschatological horizon, which may be inferred from the parable of the woman mixing yeast in with flour (Matthew 13:33).<sup>11</sup> The homely woman's necessary work for the life of her family is a perfect picture



*The Parable of the Talents, from the gospel  
lectionary of Luke the Cypriot*

of what God does, and humans ought to do, in the service of life—the renewed life of the whole creation heralding *pleroma*, despite the glaringly destructive past and the none too hopeful future. Such an attitude lies behind what Paul advocated in his days of popular eschatological expectation (2 Thessalonians 3:6–12) that, for all its mistakenness with respect to *chronos*, was true in terms of *chairos*.

### **Apocalyptic Compulsion**

To maintain such eschatological elan we need to be diligent, vigilant and single-minded (Matthew 6:24–34). As the Matthean Jesus put it, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God' (Matthew 5:8). This is an eschatological beatitude that calls for apocalyptic ardour!

Jesus knew what was in people's hearts. So, if he congratulated those who happily welcomed his good news in obvious faith and simplicity, he also disabused those whose enthusiasm for the reign of God was rather apparent than apodictic. Once, during a meal, hearing him mention resurrection, one of Jesus' fellow guests burst out, 'Blessed is

<sup>11</sup> See Elisabeth S. Fiorenza, *Searching the Scriptures* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 521–525.



The Parable of the Great Feast, by *Dionisy*

anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!’ Jesus responded abruptly with his parable of the great feast (Luke 14:16–24). It so happens in the story that all the guests who are specially invited make their excuses with scant regret when the time comes, with the result that the host invites in beggars and passers-by at the last moment, who happily attend the feast. The point of the parable is that feeling happy about the kingdom can stop short of responsive deeds, with mere fervent words. But it is our active performance today, experienced as apocalyptic compulsion, that proves our professed wishes about the future and sanctions our eschatological longings. So Jesus made it clear that only those who do Abba-God’s will (Matthew 7:21–23) enter God’s Kingdom.

### ***The Apocalyptic Enterprise of Repentance***

How we do God’s will brings to light the treasure in our hearts, as the parable of the watchful servants reveals. Blessed are those servants who carry out their duty with the sole thought of pleasing their master and not themselves (Luke 12:37), just as Jesus exemplified it in himself (Luke 13:32–33). Not so are those who, wise in their own eyes, treasure themselves while apparently treasuring God; for they trust in themselves rather than God while claiming to be righteous and condemning others.



Jesus targeted them in his parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector (Luke 18:9–14). Awakening all to God's sovereign presence in their midst he would have everyone, whether enthusiast or pessimist, turn away from their own unconscious, destructive attitudes.<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, Jesus made it known repeatedly that the grace of the Kingdom is bound up with repentance or radical change from our customary ways. His call to repentance goes with his announcement of the Kingdom (Mark 1:15). He shows sinners the source of repentance in the enabling parable of the strong versus the stronger:

When a strong man, fully armed, guards his castle, his property is safe. But when one stronger than he attacks him and overpowers him, he takes away his armour in which he trusted and divides his plunder. (Luke 11:21–22)

Anyone, however much defeated by sin and weakness, can find in Christ a way to liberation and conversion. And however strong the evil one may be, he can be bound and plundered by someone still stronger—as Christ demonstrated in himself when he was tempted by the devil and in others tormented by the devil or paralyzed by sin.

Freed thus from the evil power that may have dominated us we are not, however, to be complacent about our conversion but keen to exercise our new-found freedom both eagerly and responsibly, as the parable of the return of the unclean spirit (Luke 11:24–26) directs. We must make sure that, with the expulsion of the strong Satan by the infinitely stronger Christ, we let in Christ to rule our lives. As his words sink in, we rise above our own petty realm to seek and reach our Abba's domain in repentant love, touched by the parable of the two sons (Luke 15:11–32), which depicts the heart-warming—if heart-wringing—process of becoming new. Such growing sensitivity to the tenderness and mercy distinctive of the divine reign will end in undreamt-of intimacy with one another and with God, as the account of the last judgment in Matthew's Gospel foretells (25:31–40). Thus, repentance in its varying shades of love and hopeful joy appears as an apocalyptic enterprise for the eschatologically orientated person who is ready to make the necessary decision for a future that will be incomparably better than the present.

<sup>12</sup> See *Common Catechism*, edited by Feiner and Vischer, 123–124.

### ***Apocalyptic Cutting Edge***

A hopefully unending growth in belonging to God, who clothes us time and again with new, clean garments of salvation (Mark 2:21; Matthew 22:11; Luke 15:22), creates a sensitivity to God's universal design. God's will has been made known in the scriptures for many centuries, but God continues to reveal his pleasure progressively in human hearts and societies. Such ongoing revelation reached a high point in and through Jesus, who made the scriptures come alive as never before by his words and deeds.

As Jesus won over his people authoritatively, they wanted to know how to conduct themselves in the divine reign he had initiated. So he offered them new rules for living that fulfilled the old; and he insisted that their entry into the Kingdom depended on their greater proactive faithfulness to these rules based on a deeper understanding than religious authorities and observers were used to (Matthew 5:17–20). Thus he made them discern the apocalyptic cutting edge in this eschatological context. When a knowing lawyer, for example, asked him the way to eternal life, his arresting reply was the shocking parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). He put it to the lawyer that eternal life was bound up, not only with loving God but also with actively showing love to mere humans in need, whoever they were, beyond the customary division of friend and foe. Love that leads to life is no mere theological knowing but a matter of theophoric acting, arising out of the actual situation today and, indeed, now (Psalms 95:7; 2 Corinthians 6:2).

There were many other occasions when Jesus' teaching similarly turned the tables, for example, in the parable of the wedding guest (Luke 14:7–10). And he proposed a novel approach to social events, which has unfortunately been left untried except by a few, simple and unsophisticated, who are committed to apocalyptic action in their spontaneity. Instead of always inviting their relatives and rich friends, it would be better for hosts to give a thought to the poor and make them welcome guests (Luke 14:12–14). As the poor cannot return the invitation, God will more than compensate their hosts on the last day—whose beginnings are, however, today (Matthew 13:16–17; Luke 10:23–24).

### ***Apocalyptic Urgency***

Jesus spoke his Kingdom-parables in words and acted them out in deeds. Above all, he presented them through his very life when, for example, he affirmed: 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today

and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work' (Luke 13:32). He himself was the living parable of the urgency of the Kingdom, as it appealed to so many. And he was pleased to confirm the place of every one of them in the grace of the Kingdom.

To those who showed greatest interest in being personally involved he revealed more of the reality of his Kingdom, and invited some to follow him individually.<sup>13</sup> On such occasions he was always direct, and his words could be stark. To one would-be follower he said 'Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'; to another, that he must rise above the closest human ties and 'let the dead bury their own dead'; and to a third, that anyone who puts a hand on the plough cannot look back (Luke 9:57–62). If it turned out that none of these three was equal to the test and they were like salt without any taste,<sup>14</sup> this would be unsurprising, since even the twelve already admitted into their master's company were far from enthusiastic about his choice of images for the Kingdom in terms of poverty, chastity and humility (Mark 10:17–27; Matthew 19:12; Luke 22:24–26).

Jesus offers us, too, relevant tests of our progress towards the reign of God today. This apocalyptic urgency is not for all in our time, any more than in the time of Jesus. Nevertheless it remains valid for everyone, such as the rich youth whom the Lord called in awareness of his unmistakable potential in the Kingdom (Mark 10:17–25). There is no doubt that those called in this way need to rise to the occasion; they will, surely, but only to the extent that they seize hold of the Kingdom, follow with tenacity, and so prove themselves disciples of Jesus with a kind of blind finality! As Paul said, 'I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus' (Philippians 3:12).

### ***Apocalyptic Ingathering***

Followers of Jesus will be wherever he is on his mission, doing whatever he does in the service of his Father's vineyard. The crowning part of this mission is harvesting souls, as he indicated in his many parables of harvest (Mark 4:2–8; 26–29; Matthew 13:24–30).<sup>15</sup> Anyone who comes close

<sup>13</sup> This is not given due emphasis in the otherwise wonderful description of the Kingdom in Diarmuid Ó Murchú, *Reclaiming Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 147.

<sup>14</sup> See the little parable of the salt (Mark 9:50; Matthew 5:13; Luke 14:34–35) as interpreted by C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Collins, 1961), 103–105.

<sup>15</sup> See Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, 132–139.

to him comes to be a missionary, either spontaneously—like the Gerasene demoniac (Mark 5:1–20) or the Sychar Samaritan (John 4:5–42)—or by his express commission, as in the case of his apostles. All of us who, in similar fashion, enter into the field of mission share his vision of the plentiful harvest (Matthew 9:37–10:5)—an earthly apocalyptic ingathering rehearsing the heavenly eschatological harvest (Matthew 13:24–30).

With Jesus' direction we must learn to see for ourselves the enormous work in the fields, that cannot be delayed as the crops are ready for harvest. So, even as we work, we pray to the Lord of the harvest for more labourers, learning the lesson tucked subtly into the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–15). As there is no end to surprises of the Kingdom, before long we will be surprised by the payment made by the Lord to the planter as well as the reaper, so that all workers, without distinction, may be glad together (John 4:35–36)—an expression of a revolutionary spirit in Jesus' time and no less in ours! That is to say, as workers beside Jesus we are no less privileged than the band of his first disciples, nor are we any greater than anybody else. What matters most is that we share his sense of the urgency of mission expressed in unusual instructions, such as to dispense with normal necessities and greetings (Luke 10:4), that enjoin an apocalyptic shift



*Christ the Good Shepherd, from Speculum  
humanae salvationis*

in living according to the perception of the eschatological gestalt of God's action. As we keep to his instructions, follow him and reap the happy harvest of joyful souls (as witnessed in the Acts of the Apostles) we pattern ourselves more and more on Jesus, as he presented himself so strikingly in his parable of the good shepherd (John 10:11–17). His followers will have to be willing to lay down their lives as Jesus did for the sake of the reign of God so that there will be one flock and one shepherd!

### ***Apocalyptic Glorification***

Laying down our lives following Jesus, in true apocalyptic spirit, calls for an assurance that we, too, would take them up again as he did, in accordance with the command he had received from his Abba. It is to the credit of Martha that she received that spirit emanating from Jesus, and so was open to his revelation of himself as the resurrection and the life in the face of a death that, for all its naturalness and ordinariness, had an apocalyptic feel to it (John 11:30–45).

That same revelation is the potent, if not so obvious, message of the Book of Revelation, the climactic biblical apocalypse given to us through the seer John. Martha was led to recognise the glorious apocalyptic moment of resurrection at the moment of deepest personal loss, in her confession of Jesus as the Messiah coming into the world (John 11:27). Having endured violence for the Kingdom, John was privileged to receive the revelation of Jesus, who lifted him up with the eschatological truth about himself as one who had died but was paradoxically alive today and for ever (Revelation 1:9, 17–18). Through John, Christ gives an eschatological message to Christians of all times and invites them to respond to it, like Martha, in their varied situations and so begin enjoying the corresponding blessing that will begin in this life, but not end with it, and last beyond it for ever!

Our response of acceptance and surrender must, however, go further than Martha's. For the one whom we encounter is greater than the eschatological prophet who inspired a hope in his disciples that did not always survive his death (Luke 24:23–24). We know him as the one who has demonstrated the truth about himself that he had revealed to Martha. We look to him as someone who embodied, not only in his life but also in his death, the very apocalyptic response that he advocated in his preaching, and so became the apocalyptic Lord of victorious redemption, glorification and exaltation seen in the Book of Revelation.

The optimistic promises to the Christian victor found in Revelation's seven letters to the Churches serve the goal of encouragement that is characteristic of apocalyptic very well.<sup>16</sup> The letters also inspire the apocalyptic response that I am trying to achieve here. This response is

<sup>16</sup> See Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 786.



The Last Judgment, from the *Trinity Apocalypse*

evoked as we grow in grasping the revelation given by Christ—the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, the highest ruler (Revelation 1:5)—about the deliverance God destines for God’s people in their successive times, fulfilling the longing for God to rend the heavens and come down (Isaiah 64:1) that has gripped people in all ages down to the present. All these varied responses combine into a single one: ‘Marana tha! Amen’, ‘Come, Lord Jesus’ (1 Corinthians 16:22; Revelation 22:20)—a prayer in ancient liturgy that can still vivify all our activities today.

All of us join in this response, knowingly or not, as we proclaim in the Eucharist our faith in Jesus’ multiple coming: ‘Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life; Lord Jesus, come in glory’. And the challenge is to make of it a growing reality today, freely embracing the present and the future—that is indeed the apocalyptic with a difference, engaging us in the dialectics of living in the present and looking to the ultimate future. It is the age-old biblical invitation: ‘O that today you would listen to his voice’; ‘If you, even you, had only recognised on this

day the things that make for peace' (Psalms 95:7; Luke 19:41)—the same invitation that Jesus extended to his people at his first public address in the Nazareth synagogue. If the people in the synagogue were at first attracted by this invitation, its apocalyptic challenge to respond soon disconcerted and repelled them, which explains their rejection of Jesus at the end. No matter what our own spontaneous response may be, the final word is the divine apocalypse with its enabling, evangelical summons to come and drink the water of life (Revelation 22:17)!

### ***Apocalyptic Living***

Apocalyptic living starts with our being kindled into joy like Jesus. We remain living and breathing this joy, constantly fired by the impetus of our duties. Single-minded in persevering joy we commit ourselves to deeds that inspire more. One such deed is the continuous conversion that contributes to the refinement of lasting joy. This joy breaks through into society, explosive and even subversive in the eyes of those living in the status quo. If it is inviting and challenging enough, more of it waits for those who experience the Lord calling them to be peculiar witnesses of his Kingdom in his singular way of life. Our final joy will be sharing his zeal and so drawing many others into the sphere of his fellowship. Thus apocalyptic living is awakened living that overflows with explosive joy, conscious of God's engagement to make new heavens and new earth in us and our society, and so conscious, too, that it is time to become part of God's present and eternal revolution. In brief, apocalyptic living is dynamic, liminal living out of 'the already' to reach for 'the not yet' during 'the in-between', here and now. 'We are, as the aborigines say, just learning how to survive in infinity.'<sup>17</sup> With Jesus, though, it is a matter of learning to thrive here and now, dialectically,<sup>18</sup> in the infinity of God's time, knowing God as one who was and is but, above all, is to come.<sup>19</sup>

To put it in the evocative words of the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, which have an appeal beyond his own religious fold:

Have you not heard his silent steps? He comes, comes, ever comes.  
Every moment and every age, every day and every night he comes,  
comes, ever comes ....

<sup>17</sup> Michael Talbot, *The Holographic Universe* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1992), 302.

<sup>18</sup> See Juan Luis Segundo, *Signs of the Times* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 48.

<sup>19</sup> See Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1978), 216–226, especially 221–225.

In sorrow after sorrow it is his steps that press upon my heart, and it is the golden touch of his feet that makes my joy to shine.<sup>20</sup>

I am inclined to discern here the spirit, if not the idea, of apocalyptic living; and I wonder if it is not an interreligious phenomenon.

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<sup>20</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali* (Madras: Macmillan India, 1973), no. xlv, 27.