A Reflection as the Church Year Comes Towards its End

> *Concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. When they say, 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief, for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; for those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who dies for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.*
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> 1 Thessalonians 5.1-11

During the final weeks of the Church Year the Gospel readings become gradually more *apocalyptic*. That is to say, they describe a world which is increasingly overwhelmed by chaos and disaster, in which things are out of control. It is a kind of *picture language* to describe how a world which runs according to the principles of human selfishness and longing for control is bound, sooner or later, to come to a violent end; and as we turn our thoughts and prayers towards our *eternal destiny*, these readings help us focus on the tension at the heart of Creation between good and evil, in which there remains a need for one final push before it is all finally resolved. In the Biblical tradition (and our Muslim neighbours have a similar belief), this will be the moment when Jesus returns and finally takes control from the powers of darkness and confirms the good once and for all. There are strong reasons to think that in the Early Church, the first Christians expected this process to unfold within their own lifetime. It is the reason why the Apostle Paul offers this teaching to the Christians in Thessalonica – alongside the assurance, which was in the Epistle last week, that those who have died in the meantime are not lost in some kind of limbo, but are gathered into the embrace of God by Jesus Christ himself, part of the very meaning of his descent into death and hell on Good Friday and Holy Saturday.

We, on the other hand, after two thousand years in which this 'final push' has not yet come upon us, have the opposite temptation, to think that perhaps these words have very little meaning at all. No wonder our faith is lacklustre and ineffectual.



When we look at the state of the world, we can see that the assertion of human power for its own sake always leads to harm for those on the other side from the perpetrator: greed and the lust for control always wreak damage on the vulnerable, the poor, and on the very earth itself. It is why the value-system of the Bible is posited on self-effacement and restraint, on generosity and kindness towards others rather than indulgence of our own selves – on care for the earth, too, rather than its constant and unsustainable exploitation.

We can see that there are wickedness and harm, and the damage they have caused, all of which must be 'reconciled' – to use the biblical word – before *good* is ultimately secured. It is why those of us who are wise and mature know that the processes of *conversion* to the Gospel must continue within our own selves, however kind and peaceable we may be, until we are *totally* kind and at peace. And so it must be for everyone and everything, with a healing of what has been damaged in the meantime. We call this process 'judgement' – but it is a judgement which is marked by reconciliation and healing. Look at the Apostle's language: in the face of growing moral decay he perceives the touch of God as a catalyst which always intends *good*. The stresses and strains are 'labour pains' as something new and better is birthed around us; our hope is genuine (not a 'hope against hope') because it is the will of God that all may yet be saved, rather than be discarded and lost. That is what is 'destined' in God, and in his sending Jesus Christ among us to begin with. Even when things seem out of control, our calling is to encourage one another and sustain each other in hope – never to despair of God's mercy (*Rule of St Benedict* 4.73).

The painting, A Storm in the Rocky Mountains, by Albert Bierstadt, dates from c1870.