

In today's second reading, St Paul says that 'the world as we know it is passing away.' This and other apocalyptic texts in scripture have fed a lot of dark energy to devotees of the end times: innumerable people over two millennia have been enthusiastic 'end-of-the-worlders'. A lot still are. There is a so-called 'Catholic' website which I will not dignify by naming, that is devoted to the final apocalypse and the Second Coming: from Italian housewives to obscure Capuchin friars, the collective emphasis is on the divine chastisement hanging over us and the bitter purificatory trials that will lead up to it. In Greek mythology Cassandra was blessed by Apollo with the gift of prophecy, but then cursed by being able to prophesy only catastrophe; well, these latter-day Cassandras have a bleakly Augustinian view of humanity and an unapologetically punitive image of God, whose fire and fury, they warn us, is soon to rain down on an incorrigibly sinful human race. The administrators of this website – and its contributors – take an indecent relish in describing our final end.

This final end in America is known as 'the Rapture' because after all the darkness and fire and horror have

passed, God's chosen faithful will be taken up into heaven in rapture.

Not so long ago, when a very well-known television evangelist preached that 'the Rapture' was imminent, there were even shops selling 'Rapture dresses' – so that when the ladies were taken up into bliss, they would ascend heavenward in Vivian Westwood, Yves St Laurent and Jimmy Choo – rather than Marks & Spencer. Who wouldn't?

All this is absurd. It also has absolutely nothing to do with the gospel.

Yet it is obvious from today's second reading that St Paul and the very early Christian communities expected the Second Coming imminently – well, St Paul seems to have done – and that's what he taught those communities. In this, he appears to have been mistaken. We shouldn't be afraid of saying so, because we are looking back across two thousand years from a completely different historical, social and religious perspective.

On the other hand, Paul spoke of the end of the world *as we know it* – which is quite a different matter. Other translations have 'the world in its present form', and this

suggests that St Paul wasn't being entirely literal after all, or was writing in a poetic or mystical way that only intuition can glimpse. It isn't easy to know from such an historical distance. Despite the rather specific and drastic instructions he gave to the Corinthians, perhaps he was predicting not of the end of the world, but its transformation into another, newer form. After all, the world has been continually changing form since the moment it first began; age gave way to age and civilisation to civilisation. The particular form of the Roman world that Paul knew and lived in began, slowly, to pass away some four hundred years after he wrote that letter to the Corinthians. When has the world never *not* changed? It is changing even now. Would a Victorian recognize the world we have now? Would an Elizabethan recognize the Victorian world as it was? The present form of the world is always changing.

Leaves fall off trees, but trees remain; blossoms wither and die, but plants survive; animals moult and snakes shed their skins – so do we, of course: humans shed about 600,000 particles of skin every hour - about 1.5 pounds a year. By 70 years of age, an average person will have lost 105 pounds of

skin. Humans shed and re-grow outer skin cells about every 27 days - almost 1,000 new skins in a lifetime. Rather a disgusting thought, but the point it makes is: we go on living. Form changes constantly, but the spirit that dwells in and animates it does not.

There's a rather lovely story told about St Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits. One day in the Jesuit house in Rome, St Ignatius was sweeping the corridor when a young aspirant who wished to join the Society of Jesus asked him: 'Father Ignatius, if you knew that the world would come to an end in fifteen minutes time, what would do?' Ignatius leaned on his broom and replied: 'I would go on sweeping the corridor'.

And that's the best thing for us to do – especially in the present conditions of suffering and fear: go on sweeping the corridor. Of course, the end-of-the-world enthusiasts, including the Catholic variety, can't help but feel in the face of the present pandemic, an ugly spasm of self-congratulation, as if they've just got the final question right on 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?' But they haven't got anything right – they've got everything wrong. In their

enthusiasm for fire and death and damnation, they have displaced the love of God in their hearts; in their obsession with sin and punishment, they have left no room for mercy or grace. Turning aside from them, we will go on trusting in that mercy and grace: we will go on sweeping the corridor, knowing that however our lives unfold we will always be held in the safety net of divine love. We can never fall out of it.