

“Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap.”

Luke 21:34 Roy A. Harrisville III

If you want to know the future, listen to Jesus. If you want to know what your destiny is, listen to Jesus. It's not that he will tell you what will happen to you tomorrow, it's that he already knows and guarantees what the purpose and end of your life will be. He already knows why you are who you are and how you're going to end up. Knowing that is far more important than knowing what will happen tomorrow. Knowing what your final destination will be is far more important than knowing what the gold market will do tomorrow or if your stocks and bonds will increase or decrease next week. Watch the market all you want and invest in precious metals to your heart's content, it will not secure the future for you. It will not tell you what the purpose and final destination of your life will be. Only Jesus can do that. If we all truly believed that, if we truly held on to Christ's words about what life is and its ultimate end, I think we would live lives of hope that would not be so much concerned about tomorrow, as about today.

In the ancient world men and women were worried about their lives just as much as modern people are. People have not changed since those ancient days, we just do things differently. The desires and fears of human beings remain the same but how we deal with them changes. Long ago in Greece they dealt with the fear of the future by the interpretation of omens and oracles. Omens were signs in nature that led people to believe one or another thing would happen. People believed that there was a connection between nature and humans that actually predicted individual human lives as though volcanoes and floods were intimately connected to people. An eagle would fly overhead in the sky with a snake in its grasp and someone would say it meant good things would happen or bad things would happen. A thunderstorm would rage during the birth of a child and someone would say it meant the baby would either be famous or not. The problem with omens is that you never really knew if your prediction was right.

So, the ancient people thought up other ways of trying to predict the future. They practiced divination, which was the practice of cutting up animals and looking at their insides and from the color of the organs the priests were supposed to be able to tell if the signs were good or not. If that didn't work, you could always go to the several oracles scattered around the ancient world and actually put a question to the oracle and get an answer. An oracle was an actual person. If you were worried about your crops and the harvest, or if your city should enter into a certain alliance or if you should or should not go to war, then you'd ask the oracle. You went to the shrine where the oracle was and you paid a fee. Somehow there was always a fee. You had a sacrifice performed by whatever priests were there, and then you were ushered in to the presence of the oracle by his or her official interpreters. All this was done in magnificent buildings donated by various citizens or famous people that created an impression of spiritual confidence. The oracle would say something in a state of meditation or even drug induced trance, and then the official interpreters would explain what the oracle said. Sometimes the answers were so cryptic that no one could understand them and sometimes the questioner would even be turned away.

Later on people invented horoscopes to try and predict the future and escape what they called Fate. The ancient Greeks believed that the gods themselves could not escape fate. Fate was the one thing that everyone had to bow to whether divine or human. So people came up with the silly idea that planets and stars have something to do with individual business ventures and even possible mates for marriage. It is still a silly system that some people take seriously and it is a tragedy that they do, for it is a system that is much like the omen system and oracle system of old. Stars and planets are impersonal objects that have no consciousness or feeling. Can they be manipulated and orchestrated? Yes, even Christians believe that the stars and sun and moon and planets and the whole of creation is under the control of God Almighty. We believe that we are all in the hand of God but we do not believe that God gives us signs through nature or whether or

not we ought to listen to the commercials from G. Gordon Liddy and buy gold in great quantities and horde the stuff in our houses. It might be a real good investment to buy gold, I don't know. But the stars have nothing to do with it. If gold goes up or goes down it will not be because some fool looked in his horoscope this week and read something about the convergence of Jupiter and Mars.

Superstition is not a good thing. All the practices I've described so far are superstition. Science has demonstrated time and again that there is no connection between the movement of the stars and the future or our individual lives. None of us are able to use the entrails of animals or the trajectory of comets to predict the future. It just doesn't work like that. It can't. So many people have given up on the future and have chosen to spend today in the present and never mind about tomorrow. Some people have decided that if they cannot predict the future and nobody knows what's going to happen anyway, that they might as well enjoy what they can today and take advantage of what they can now. They look down their noses at religious people saying that we are escapists or wishful thinkers who are as foolish as those ancient people who consulted oracles or the silly ones today who read horoscopes.

Just because we read ancient books that come from the times of omens and oracles doesn't mean Christians believe in that sort of thing. In fact, it is the Christian faith that has been most influential in wiping out superstition and all that nonsense. It is Jesus who has been responsible for a more responsible knowledge of life.

When Jesus was asked by his disciples to tell them "what sign" there would be to let them know the end was near, he never really answered them. He spoke of wars and insurrections and that Christians would be called upon to make their witness and that the sun and moon would lose their light, but he never really gave the disciples the kind of answer they were looking for. It's not that he was trying to be sneaky, like the oracles, and give some murky answer that could be variously interpreted just in case the prophecy didn't come true, it's just that Jesus was more

interested in how you live your life now, not in when the end will come. He is not interested in trying to escape some mythical concept of fate. He is not interested in a date certain when the big crunch will come. It's not that the end doesn't matter. It matters a great deal. It matters that one day, one hour in the future a whole new creation will come into being. The old will pass away and the new will come. Sin and suffering and death will be no more. Pain will vanish. The Son of God will come with the clouds of heaven and our redemption will take place. That is the hope of all Christians. It has been the hope of Christians since the very beginning of the church and is the the reason why the church exists and why we gather every Sunday and why we bother to do family devotions and why celebrate Christmas and Easter and try to live by the words of Jesus. Because there is an end, we live life the way we do, or try to, at least. Precisely because Jesus is coming again Christians all over the world sing hymns and read scripture and pray and worship and try to live the Christian life. The end matters, but it matters most in what it does to us today and that's what Jesus is after.

Do we really think that Jesus cares about dates and days as we do? Why should he? Time means nothing to him. Space is irrelevant for him. He is past space and time and exists not within creation but beyond it. What matters to him is how we behave to each other. Do we keep our promises? Do we help the poor? Is Jesus the Lord of our life? Are we treating our neighbors with love and respect? Or, do we take offense at the slightest offense and revenge ourselves against our neighbor?

Christians do not care about when the end will happen. It doesn't matter. It only matters that an end will come. Someday it will come. It is enough for us to know that the future of this life and this universe is not eternal, but that at some point all will be torn apart. The sun will stop giving its light, signs will happen among the stars, and the very heavens will be shaken. The imagery is ancient but the pictures are clear. This is not superstition. This is not the dumb horoscope. This is the word of the Lord. This word is not designed to tell us what tomorrow will

bring and how we may escape fate. This word is not designed to get us to hide under our beds when lightning strikes and “things go bump in the night”. On the contrary, Jesus says we must watch and stay awake. Don’t worry about the signs and the terror they will cause others. They will not be terrible for us. Because we believe that, because we believe that an end will come and that that end will be our redemption, not our destruction, our salvation not our condemnation, our deliverance not our obliteration, we therefore believe that it makes a difference how we live today in the here and now, with our friends and family and neighbors today, in this life, in this place. Because an end is coming, because Jesus is coming, we have reason to live and make choices and behave as best we can in service to our present and future Lord.

Advent is the time of waiting, not for the first coming of Christ, but for the second. It is not meant to get us ready for Christmas. That has already happened. Advent is meant to get us ready for the second coming of Christ and the end of all things.

Some might say that such belief is merely wishful thinking and superstitious. The scoffers and critics can say what they like, but if it were not for this belief in the end and the belief in Christ’s future redemption, there would be little incentive or motive for Christians to bother about this life now. It is as CS Lewis wrote years ago that we “were made for another world.” Nothing in this life can satisfy our deepest desire until we look beyond this life to the next. Nothing can keep us here by itself for it too is transient and fleeting. Who among us has truly experienced what it is to be fully and completely human and alive? How many times have our longings been disappointed even after we were convinced we had achieved them? Time goes by and the novelty wears off and we find ourselves hungry once again. Even a good Thanksgiving meal doesn’t last forever. We hunger again even after stuffing ourselves. Perhaps, as Lewis says, such hunger and desire is meant to point us beyond this life to the real thing; to the life beyond. When we experience desires that cannot be satisfied in this life we are being

pointed to a hunger and thirst that only Jesus can satisfy in the next. This is not superstition or ancient religion. It is as present and as relevant as the moment we share now.

It is because our true country awaits us in the end, that we may be good citizens today. Because our true life is kept for us in heaven, we may pay attention to life here. Because we have faith that one day all will end, we may live each day as though it were the end, not in selfish indulgence but in service to that day and the Lord who comes with it. To hope in the future is to be ready for today. Without that hope today becomes an end in itself, unsatisfying and empty. But if it is a prelude to what is to come, if it is but the first installment in a new life, then we may plunge ourselves into this life and await the Savior's coming with patience and joy believing that our redemption draws near. Amen.