

## World=s End

I=d like to give you an update on the end of the world.

We have past through at least the first period of trial unscathed. With the fall of the Soviet Union the prospect of an all-out nuclear war has receded. One of my earliest memories is the Cuban missile crisis. I was only seven years old but I could hear on the special reports that would interrupt my TV programs that the world was on the brink of a nuclear holocaust. And I could pick up from the mood of my parents and teachers that this was no media hype. That the world could well end by the end of the week. The subsequent release of tapes of Kennedy=s meetings with his advisors and interviews with the former Soviet players have if anything shown that the dangers had been downplayed. They show just how close we came to Armageddon in those thirteen daysBif you need a reminder, see the movie.

But we=ve only been granted a reprieve. This period of trial has passed. We are the first generation in the history of mankind who has had to cope with the scientific prospect that not only our own life, but all life on earth could end at any moment Now of course the early Christians believed the world was going to end and end soon. But they actually prayed for it to come, they were looking forward to it. Because they believed that the end of the world would be followed by a new world where everything would be turned upside down and they would move from the bottom of the social ladder to the top. Our post-apocalyptic imagination is not so rosy. Again, if you need a reminder go to the movies. We do not imagine the end of our world ushering in something better. We are not praying for the day, we are praying that the day never comes. But it will come. Even if no one ever launches another nuclear missile, even if no terrorist ever releases some genetically engineered virus, the world will still end. This is a dogma of our faith. It is also a scientific fact. The only question is when and how.

First the scientific facts. Astronomers offer three different scenarios.

First, the stars might fall out of the skies. That is, a massive comet may collide with the earth eradicating all life. Scientists believe that the impact of a comet 65 million years ago came pretty close. It killed the dinosaurs, in fact it killed 90% of all the species on the face of the earth. Our ancestors are among the few that survived. Ironically, we may even owe our own emergence as a species to the ecological niche that was opened up by that holocaust.

It may happen again. Now we used to think that what killed the dinosaurs was that the dust raised by the impact of the comet blotted out the sun for a few years and that they gradually starved if not froze to death. We may have the technological resources to wait out the long winter. However a study of a comet hitting Jupiter a couple years ago has dimmed our prospects. It turns out that even worse than what happens when millions upon millions of tons of pulverized dirt are blown up into the atmosphere is what happens when those millions of tons of dirt fall back to earth. For as they fall back, they heat up, warming the air around them. Scientists found that Jupiter's upper atmosphere was heated up to a temperature of over 3000 degrees by the dirt falling from that comet impact. The dinosaurs may not have died a slow cold death--they may well have been flash-fried--it may all have been over in a matter of hours.

Now if we can discover such a comet while it is still far enough away, we may be able to deflect its path. This is why NASA wants to build projectile launchers deep in space. We do need a star wars defense system, but not one pointed towards our enemies. We need one pointed towards the stars. NASA tracks tens of thousands of comets and asteroids that buzz by us every year. A couple years ago, a couple days after Christmas, a meteor that could have wiped out a swath of territory the size of France missed us by a scant few hundreds of thousands of miles. And what really got my attention, we had only discovered it a week earlier.

However even if we manage to defend ourselves against the meteors and comets, one day the sun will darken. It still has billions of years to go, but one day it will burn itself out. And life on this planet will die out with it. In fact, since a star expands as it ages, the sun will actually envelop us before it burns itself out. Once more, the end will be a blaze rather than a whimper.

But whose to say what we will be able to do by then? By then we may be able to travel to other stars. Our world may embrace a multitude of planets and we may be one of a number of intelligent species. The death of the sun may not mean the death of life or even of humanity after all--it may only mean that the time had come for us to leave our childhood home and venture among the stars.

But however far we reach out into the cosmos, our world will still come to an end someday--for the universe itself has a life-span, and will die. Scientists know that our universe is constantly expanding, indeed that it began with one big bang 15 billion years ago. And we know that depending upon how much matter there is, the universe will either go on expanding forever, or if it is massive enough, the expansion will be gradually arrested by gravity and it will fall back

in on itself. However whichever scenario plays out our days are numbered--energy will either dissipate forever and the universe will eventually brown out, or it will fall in on itself in one big crunch. From this last cosmic death, there can be no respite.

Now one might say, we all know we are going to die. Why should we be any more bothered by knowing that the world itself will die? I think the difference is that the end of my life is not the end of everything I care about. My offspring, my friends, what I have accomplished--many of the things I most care about will live on after I die. But the end of the world means the end of everything. In the end we will leave without a trace. Ultimately there will be no one or no thing to care that we ever existed at all.

So much for science. Now onto religion. What does it all mean? What does it mean that our world will one day end and there will no longer be any trace of our ever having existed? More specifically, does it mean that life is ultimately meaningless? But if that were so why would Christianity have continued to preach the end of the world even after the Christians found their place in the world? If that were so why would we continue to pray for the end of the world every time we recite the Our Father?

No, the end of the world does not mean that life is meaningless. But it does mean that for life to be meaningful, its meaning is not to be found simply in the future, in what we leave behind for those who come after us. What it does mean is that for life to be meaningful we must be able to appreciate that meaningfulness now, in the present. What it does mean is that for life to be truly meaningful we must be able to live in the present. What after all did Jesus preach? He did not simply warn about the coming of the Kingdom of God, he also announced that the Kingdom of God has already begun, that it is already present in our midst in everything we do, in everyone we meet, and in particular, in our gathering together, as do today, our gathering together as a body, as his body, the Body of Christ. For while the heavens and the earth will pass away, the love of God, a love which surpasses all understanding, a love which envelops all that is, a love which has breathed us into life, that love will never pass away. That love is our true life, now and forever. To live in that love, ever more fully, that is our true end.