

## "The End is Nigh!"

My nephew, Matthew, a Catholic, has married into a Plymouth Brethren family. His wife, Sarah, has left them in favour of the Church of England, as has her brother, but her parents are still practising members of the Brethren. Sarah has often described the rigours of the life into which she was brought up which comprised spending nearly all day in church on Sunday even when she was a very small child. As a child and as a girl she was not permitted to speak or play but had to sit for long hours in the pew listening to men preaching hell fire and damnation - it was always men as even grown women and wives were not permitted to speak in the assemblies and had to have their heads covered at all times. She was only allowed to play with other brethren children and was brought up to have no truck with the world outside the Brethren community which belonged firmly in the grasp of Satan. At school she was withdrawn from religion lessons and even science classes so as not to be tainted by unorthodox teaching.

To help me understand her background she gave to a book which I have just finished reading called *In the days of Rain* by Rebecca Stott. Stott's father was a preacher in the sect but became deeply disillusioned when the Brethren grew increasingly strict during the 1960s and 70s under the leadership of Big Jim Taylor. As Taylor descended ever more deeply into madness his demands on the Brethren membership became ever more extreme. People were shut off from other members for even the slightest murmur of dissent and errant members had to be imprisoned in a room in their house with no human contact, even from family members, apart from a weekly visit from elders. These would quiz them until satisfied they had sincerely repented of their misdemeanour and could be readmitted to the membership. Not surprisingly, the Stott family left the Brethren and the story tells of Stott's father's struggles to come to terms with the real world outside the sect, his inability to hold down a job, and his tragic descent into alcoholism and compulsive gambling, leaving enormous debts on his eventual death. Despite this, Stott tells her story with candour and a deep and tender love for her father in spite of his failings.

Central to the beliefs of the Brethren was the notion that the Second Coming of the Lord, towards which the readings today point, was imminent. Any day they expected what they called The Rapture to take place when Christ would come and call to himself all who had proved themselves worthy and he would spirit them away to heaven through the air leaving the less worthy to perish in the fires of hell which would soon engulf the world. This vision was a daily cause of fear to the young Rebecca Stott who knew she would be one of those left behind because of her naughtiness.

Even today we hear every so often of predictions of the end of the world and people have been known to sell everything they have and sit on the beach waiting for the Lord to come and take them to heaven. I can only imagine the disappointment when they

wake the next morning still here and with nothing but the clothes they are wearing to keep them until the next prediction of the Rapture.

In this, however, they are not dissimilar to many early Christians who were expecting Christ to return any day to herald the end of the world and take his followers up to heaven in the clouds. Many were so convinced of this that they felt it was pointless sowing seeds and waiting for the harvest and they gave up all normal activities to wait and pray until the Lord came. This led to normal life falling apart in some of the first Christian communities and St Paul has to warn the leaders of the early Church groups that if people were not prepared to work they should not be given any food.

I believe we make a big mistake if we imagine the Day of Judgment to be some cataclysmic event that will happen at some uncertain time in the future. The effect of this is to lull us into a false sense of security that probably the end of the world is still billions of years away and we can afford to slack off. I think it's more helpful to think of each day as, in a sense, the Day of Judgment because in every moment our words and actions judge us and often convict us of acting and speaking in an unchristian way. Jesus may indeed come in glory on clouds of heaven with trumpet blast on the Last Day, but the more salient and relevant fact is that he comes to us each moment of every day in the people we meet, in the decisions we make and in the actions we commit to. If we are not meeting Christ in our spiritual lives every day and becoming ever more familiar with his mindset and his heart, we will not be able to act on his behalf and in his name in all the circumstances of life in which we find ourselves from moment to moment every day. So the advice of the Alleluia verse today is most relevant and to the point:

Stay awake, praying at all times for the strength to stand with confidence before the Son of Man.