

Repent! The Kingdom of God is Near!

We have all seen that old cartoon of someone holding up a sign that says, "Repent! The end is near!" Well, it is no joke. The end IS near.

Near is a relative term. Last week we heard of the death of two great cricketers who played for Australia, Rod Marsh and Shane Warne. Both died from heart attacks. One was 74, the other 52. News of Marsh's heart attack and death came as a surprise, while Warne's death came as a shock to many. Neither man would have thought that their deaths were so near. But such deaths remind us that near is a relative term. The young are to take no comfort in the prospect of a future, and the old are to take no comfort from a presumption that they won't be around to deal with the messes in the news. Young or old, we are all waiting upon God.

Near may be a relative term, but the end is not. It is clear and blunt. The end. The end of all that we see with our eyes and know with our minds and desire with our hearts. Nothing of what is will remain except those who live and die in Christ. Everything else is gone to be replaced by something more, something none of us now can predict but only believe. The end is near.

The end is near, and we are a people of unclean lips, unclean hearts, and unclean lives. We have spoken words that should not have been said, allowed ourselves to be captive to our heart's desires instead of the Word of God, and been consumed with the things that are not permanent but temporary. We live in an age in which it is legal and moral to rip a child from a woman's womb but not to speak words that may offend this right. We live at a time when we squander the resources of the internet on porn, unsocial media, and pretend lives. We live together without marriage and lie until we no longer know what is true. We hate those who dare to disagree with us or our political opinions. The end of it all is that we do not feel safe in a world of war and the violence that comes too close to home.

The end is near, and we are an unclean people awaiting a clean, holy, and righteous God. Who can make us clean? Who can make us holy? Who can make us righteous? Who can prepare us for the end to come so that we shall not be found wanting or unprepared? That is the promise we Christians hold to the world. We cannot predict tomorrow, but we can tell others the end is near. We cannot create a better world or a better life insulated from pain, strife, or threat, but we can tell others of Him who will not abandon them in their pain or need. We cannot erase sin by ignoring it, but we can tell others of Him who forgives our sins. We cannot make the dirty clean, but we can tell others of the blood of Christ that cleanses us from sin and its stain. We cannot satisfy with a good life or a long one, but we can tell of Him who raises the dead to life that does not end.

The end may be near, but Christ is with us. He is not some cold and aloof God who watches us from afar but the God who became flesh in Mary's womb, who lived the perfect life for the imperfect, who died to pay sin's price, and who rose to end death's reign. This Jesus not only can but does render clean the unclean. He does it in our midst when baptismal water gives new life to the old dead life left behind in that water. This Jesus is holy enough to cast His holiness over us as clothing so that we are not who we were even though we are not quite who we shall be. This Jesus is righteous enough to keep the Law's demands for all who trust in Him and not in their own works. The end is near, but Christ is with us.

Christ is with us in the voice of His Word speaking this Gospel to those who have no hope, through flawed and frail voices of preachers whom He calls to serve Him. Christ is with us in the absolution that forgives not in the name of the minister but in the stead and by the command of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is with us in the bread and wine that He sets apart to be His flesh and blood, our Passover feast and the foretaste of the Marriage Feast of the Lamb, which is coming. The end is near, but Christ is with us.

So do not look where people claim but look where Christ has placed His name. Do not despair like Job once did, but rejoice that God IS with us and He is even now bringing us to be with Him when He comes in His glory. Do not seek fulfilment in the world but in Him who is even now completing what He began in you in your baptism. Do not cry out in fear or lash out in bitterness, for we have no attachment to the things of this world. We are but strangers and pilgrims here who know that our lives are hidden with God, and He will reveal the blessed and everlasting place He has prepared for us. It is enough for us simply to endure, to hold on in faith to the promises of God kept in Christ so that we may hope in the face of a world which is not improving and a life that is not getting better and better.

Repent. Repent not simply of sin and its free reign in your heart, mind, and life. Repent for exchanging your joy for despair, your hope for fear, your confidence for doubt, and your present God for a distant dream. God IS with you. That is exactly why we are here. We come not for an absent God who might watch us but for a present God who will save us, who is even now saving us by His Word and Sacraments, and who has saved us by marking us with the cross in our baptism and raising us to new life in Christ.

The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Remember, not simply that the end is near, but Christ is the end, the beginning and end, for you and me.