

What does the future have in store?

One of my abiding memories of the seaside towns I visited as a child is the kiosk on the promenade where the fortune teller sat. Their customers didn't seem to mind whether they read palms or tea leaves. All they wanted to know was what the future had in store. If seaside fortune tellers really could predict the future, they wouldn't just be telling fortunes, they'd be making them! They'd soon have no need to take up residence for the summer in draughty promenade kiosks.

I wonder what the future has in store for us as we approach the end of this momentous year. What runes are we to read if we want to know what lies ahead in the 2020s?

During Advent the church's year turns naturally to the future, as we see in today's readings. In Isaiah 61, the future holds out the hope of rebuilding and repopulating Judean cities devastated by conquest and colonisation (Isaiah 61.4). God's people will be liberated from long years of exile in Babylon. Their future is God-shaped, and their God loves justice and righteousness above robbery and wrongdoing (61.8). The prophet sees his people as a bride and groom about to begin their future together, clothed in the regalia of God's coming blessing: the robe of righteousness, the garments of salvation, a garland for the groom and jewels for his bride (61.10).

The prophet's words remind me of a couple who'd booked their wedding day for the middle of this year, well before COVID-19 struck. As the day drew nearer, they wondered whether it would happen. Like every happy couple, they wanted their day to give their family and friends a glimpse of what their future held as they celebrated the blessings their relationship would bring. In the end they weren't disappointed. They married on July 4th, the first day that churches were allowed to open for weddings. It was an emotional, uplifting, fulfilling occasion, a taste of things to come. Israel's liberation from exile will be just like that, says the prophet. God's future is like a wedding celebration.

Christians at Thessalonika, the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, are also wondering what the future holds. Paul may be writing to a church that he founded when he was supporting his ministry by labouring among leather workers (2.9; cf Acts 18.3). They're now finding that Christianity is costly. They're facing persecution. Some may have lost jobs because of their faith. Elsewhere Paul reveals that these Christians are very poor, yet remarkably

generous (2 Cor 8.1 ff). What's their secret? When Paul taught them the gospel, he encouraged them to believe that the world's future lies in the hands of the living God. And what an impact this good news is having. In the brief extract from Paul's letter in today's reading, we glimpse their ceaseless prayer, wholehearted thanksgiving, overflowing joy, signs of the life-giving power of their living Lord in uncertain times.

Here are Christians who despite all their struggles are already displaying something of the future that God intends for all creation (cf 2.12): the peace that renews the whole of life in God's holiness and faithfulness, available in Christ Jesus and his Spirit, mediated through the trustworthy love and care of Paul and his co-workers (2.7b-11, 2.17-3.13). Whatever the future holds for them can only bring more, not less, of this divine and human bounty.

During 2020 life for most people has been stripped back to 'essentials'. We've learned to celebrate the labours of often low-paid and hard-pressed essential workers, to restrict ourselves for a while to essential travel and essential shopping, to see less of family and friends. For some this year has brought real hardship, not just 'stripping back' but 'stripping away': loved ones, livelihoods, life experiences and expectations we once took for granted. The pandemic has shone its spotlight on so many inequalities throughout the world. And yet there have been signs of hope, of how the future might hold something different if we can only rise to the challenges of this year's legacy.

Slowing down, travelling less, walking or cycling rather than driving, cleaner air, tending the garden, working from home, exercising regularly, looking out for neighbours, using online spiritual resources, showing that 'Black Lives Matter', planning for a greener, more sustainable world. Many have said that they don't want to go back to life as it was. Only time will tell. I wonder what the biblical vision of a God-shaped, Christ-centred future has to say at the end of this pandemic year. The very least it can do is to point us in the direction of a world ruled by different powers and values.

Today's gospel also shines a spotlight on anxious times. St John's first readers faced persecution from their local synagogue (John 9.22, 34; 16.1-4). We can see from what he writes that they were having to endure racial disharmony (4.1 ff), prejudice towards women and disabled people (5.2ff, 8.1 ff, 9.2), foreign occupation (11.48). The ministry of John the Baptist attracted people who wondered what the future held: 'Are you God's answer in these dark and difficult days?' John insists that God's future is illuminated not by him but 'the one who is coming after me' (1.27), 'the light' to whom he testifies (1.8),

the Christ who is at the heart of God's wise and loving ways of ordering the world (1.1, 3.16).

Like Paul, John the evangelist is confident that God's future is Christ-shaped and Spirit-breathed. But they only ever paint their pictures of the future in broad brush strokes. This is part of their abiding appeal. They invite Christians in every age to work out for ourselves what a Christ-shaped future might look like.

When we ask 'what does the future have in store for us?', we sometimes imply that the future is 'there', waiting to unfold. In the words of the Prime Minister, the future is "oven ready". But a recent book by two people who were involved in drawing up the Paris Agreement on climate change five years ago this weekend suggests otherwise. Their title says it all: *The Future We Choose*.¹ They insist that the future's script isn't yet written. We can choose whether 2050 is more likely to be carbon neutral or an environmental disaster.

The Bible can make a vital contribution as we try to work out what 'the new normal' will be. Its pictures may be broad-brush, but their texture is clear enough. The future of our world is Christ-shaped and Spirit-breathed. What does that mean?

When Jesus was asked how people should live in the light of God's future, he gave a memorable answer: "Love God with all that you are. Love your neighbour as yourself". And that means loving your enemies too. All-embracing love, shown in compassion and justice, map out the contours of a Christ-shaped future. Or in the words of striking sentence in a recent review of a book about Jesus: 'only friendship and justice will save us'².

What does the future have in store, then, as we approach the end of this momentous year? The seaside fortune tellers may have vacated their kiosks until next year, but those who root their hope in the Bible can't afford to neglect their interest in the future. Advent directs us to God's future: Christ-shaped, Spirit-breathed, a gracious gift – and ours to choose.

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¹ Christiana Figueres and Tom Rivett-Carnac, *The Future We Choose. Surviving the Climate Crisis*, London: Manilla Press 2020.

² Terry Eagleton's review of Julian Baggini, *The Godless Gospel: Was Jesus a Great Moral Teacher?*, in *The Guardian Review*, December 5th 2020, p 12