

## What gives you hope?

Olivier Messiaen, the french avant garde composer and organist and devout catholic was a man full of hope.

His most celebrated work is "Quartet for the End of Time". A piece composed for clarinet, violin, cello and piano. It was inspired by the book of Revelation, with much of the imagery being set to music. Perhaps what is most interesting, is that Messiaen composes this famous work within a prisoner of war camp in France in WW2. He is captured by Germans and despite absolutely awful conditions he writes music brimming with hope. But he doesn't just write it. He rehearses it- in the camp toilets with fellow prisoner musicians. Messiaen believes that this hope filled piece needed to be written, he believed it mattered and he elevates completing this piece over his own chance at freedom, firmly believing that God wanted him there, composing that piece,... in the toilets. Although this seems ludicrous, he encourages his peers to stick around too, bail on their escape plans and continue to prepare for a premiere of the work. The Premiere of Quartet for the End of Time takes place in Barrack 27 of Stalag 8-A on 15th January 1941.

In his novel Orfeo, Richard Powers gives an excellent account of this premiere, moving methodically through the work section by section. If I had longer, I would read out the extended passage as the story is amazing, but for now I will give you a taste by describing the end of the performance.

The End of the end, when it arrives at last, it comes as a solo violin above piano throb. Pared back to its essence the melody abides, burnt pure in the crucible of the war. Out of a cloud of shimmering E major chords- the key of paradise, the violin hints at all a person might still have, after death takes everything. The violin rises; the piano climbs along toward some final immobility beyond human patience and hearing. The praise wanders higher into C minor, through a frozen minefield of ambiguous diminished and augmented chords, rising again to another E major, then one more in the octave above. From out at the edge of the

key- and fingerboards, the line glances back at a lost Earth on a cold night, when there is time no longer.

When the last notes die out in the frozen air, nothing happens. The captive audience sits in silence. And in silence, awe and anger, perplexity and joy, all sound the same. At least there's applause. The prisoners in their clogs and bottle green Czech uniforms fall back into the world and make an awkward bow. And then Le Boulaire (one of the musicians) will recall decades later, lots of unresolved discussions, about this thing that no one had understood.

Years later Messiaen writes "if I composed this quartet for anything... it was to escape from the snow, the war, captivity, to escape from myself. What I gained most of all from it was that, among three hundred thousand prisoners, I was perhaps the only one who wasn't a prisoner"

If I could be transported to any time in history to see a musical performance, I think I would choose the premiere of the Quartet. While many of the prisoners were confounded by his piece which is often referred to as his "gentle apocalypse", it has impacted and inspired many since. For me- he was a man of deep faith, who held onto hope in the darkest place, remembering, composing and performing the great christian hope.

Is there a fellow christian or someone from the past who inspires and impacts you? Encourages you to stay firm in your faith?

### **Apocalypse now?**

Today we reflect on Christ, the King. And we have the apocalyptic texts which Messiaen loved so dearly to chew on. First we have Daniel describing the great arrival of the Son of Man, riding on the clouds. Then we have John in Revelation, proclaiming Jesus in all his power and might.

Apocalyptic texts have confused Christians for quite some time. As cultural waves surge through the church, we have had faithful christians

hold to the word of God, although interpreting these texts in many different ways. Some have read it literally, holding the text next to newspaper headlines, then casting their eyes up to the sky to see if it could be now and some of us have skimmed these passages because we just don't know what to do with it. The years I spent in pentecostal congregations led me to sit under quite a number of teachings about the end times, with pastors doing some hectic calculations using numbers found in the text trying to determine the year of Jesus' return. It was always humorous to watch them recalculate using the same numbers but inside out and back to front to update Jesus' expected time of arrival, whenever their earlier prediction passed with not a cloud in the sky.

## **Daniel**

In our reading today we see the prophet Daniel share his vision of Judgement Day in the Apocalypse. The passage is full of allegory and metaphor as is typical of apocalyptic literature. Daniel uses *imagery* to describe God's power over history and his commitment to the Jewish people. Daniel's purpose was not to encode secret meanings for us to crack today, rather, he is using metaphors which made sense to the original audience. And by looking at it through this lens, is how this puzzling passage begins to make more sense to us millenia later.

The people Daniel was writing to were the faithful Jews under the rule of Antiochus IV. Antiochus was not a fan of the Jews. He burnt their texts, banned their religious practice and famously offered a sacrifice to Zeus in the form of a pig at the altar desecrating the temple

Old Testament scholar, Walter Bruggeman, notes that the Jewish people were so tired and fatigued from their long suffering and persecution, they had begun to lose hope. They could no longer imagine that history as we know it, could restore their place and identity. The late developments within the old testament, therefore, sees the growing belief that the historical system would come to an end and God would create something new. That is why apocalyptic faith responds to events from the outside of history rather than from within it.

The apocalyptic vision in our passage is set in a court- room with four beasts being tried. In verses 1-8, which precede our passage today, Daniel describes the four beasts who represent the wicked Gentile nations which scholarship suggest are Babylon, Persia, Syria and Greece. In this courtroom with these nation monsters, God (described as the Ancient of Days, OR in other words, the holy and transcendent god)...God is presiding as Judge. He is wise- the poetic descriptions describing him as looking somewhat like Gandalf the Great, dressed in white and seated upon a chair of fire. The poetry continues with descriptions of the swathes of people before him- thousands upon thousands, tens of thousand times ten thousand, in other words- all of humanity standing before God.

Verses 11 and 12 are missing from the set text but they actually hold some important information. It describes the the fourth monster (which is Greece), who has a horn protruding which speaks boastful words. Daniel describes this monster being slain and his body thrown into the blazing fire. To the persecuted Jews reading this, the boastful words look back to Antiochus blaspheming and committing sacrilege in the temple by slaying the pig. Daniel is forth telling justice- with blasphemous Greece being slain and destroyed before all of human history.

Our passage continues with verse 13, describing the son of man descending on the clouds. The 'Son of man' was to its jewish audience, not a future messiah per se, but understood to be righteous israel standing firm in their faith despite persecution. In this imagery, with israel being vindicated in God's court, Daniel seeks to encourage them. The text promises them not only survival, but entrusts them with authority over their enemies, sovereign power and an everlasting kingdom. It will be worth it, says Daniel's subtext. Keep going, keep going, do not give up.

## **Revelation**

When we turn to today's passage from Revelation chapter 1, we see John transpose these apocalyptic images for the christian community. Brugermann points out that in reading Daniel and then Revelation, we

need to be agile to move from the cosmic poetry in Daniel to John's specificity of Jesus. Daniel wasn't imagining future Jesus when he shared his prophecy, but John is looking back and finding Jesus there. John expands and extends Daniel's apocalyptic understanding by placing Jesus at the centre of the promises given to faithful Israel. Christ arrives on a cloud, he prevails over empire, and God's promises to Israel, and now Christians, are through him.

And so the message stays the same between Daniel and Revelation: RESIST empire, live faithfully. When it feels like you are losing, you are winning, we have already won. Christ is the King over all of history. Keep going, keep going, keep going.

In some ways, applying these passages would be much easier if we were Christians somewhere else- Nigeria, China, Myanmar. In midst of persecution, these passages would be the lifeline for those who live risking everything to worship Jesus.

But we thankfully are here in Sydney and we are blessed to be able to worship freely and safely. In many instances our faith in our context, does the opposite of what was experienced by the early church- it GIVES us power, and saves us from persecution. So what should we do with it?

I have thought about this a fair bit over the past week, preparing for this sermon and what I keep coming back to is how lucky we are to worship freely. Right now ours in many ways, is an easy Christianity and we cannot let this lead us to complacency in our faith. This eschatological hope we share first with Daniel and then John and the early church, pulls us out of ourselves and our easy Christianity and offers us an expansive view. In meeting together at church, we participate in the global church and the historical church, just one snapshot of God's community at this time in history. Rocking up to church each week matters- and it matters a lot! Our routines and traditions here teach us

how we fit into this kingdom, and reminds us to keep working out that kingdom in our communal life and personally.

While we may not suffer for our faith in the same way that the original recipients of John's Revelation did, his letter is still for us. We may live without persecution but our faith is still challenged. Our lives contain suffering and pain and difficulty along with our sin and inadequacy and we can easily tire and want to give up. Our Christian hope meets us in this place too. Our suffering is temporary because we belong to a kingdom which is permanent, our pain is temporary because we will be healed, our sin is no more because our King hung on a cross, so we could enter his kingdom.

Christ's kingdom is breaking in bit by bit. We play our part in our small lives- proclaiming Christ as King, and leading faithful lives for him. We are transformed in this kingdom, and we pray for our lives, words and witness to stir others to join us to join in this wonderful hope.

**QUESTIONS:**

Is there a fellow christian or someone from the past who inspires and impacts you? Encourages you to stay firm in your faith?

Can you give examples from your own life, when you have drawn hope from knowing Christ as King?