

An illustration of life as reported by St Bede:

“The present life of man upon earth, O King, seems to me in comparison with that time which is unknown to us like the swift flight of a sparrow through the mead-hall where you sit at supper in winter, with your Ealdormen and thanes, while the fire blazes in the midst and the hall is warmed, but the wintry storms of rain or snow are raging abroad. The sparrow, flying in at one door and immediately out at another, whilst he is within, is safe from the wintry tempest, but after a short space of fair weather, he immediately vanishes out of your sight, passing from winter to winter again. So this life of man appears for a little while, but of what is to follow or what went before we know nothing at all.” (St. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*).

What we know is this life. Everything else is speculation. But that has not stopped speculation, which some thought to be knowledge. The ancient Egyptians had a fully mapped out understanding of what happened to the dead and what the dead needed to have with them in their tomb to have a successful after-life. Their erstwhile slaves, the Israelites, claimed no such knowledge. In fact, in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament as we call it, without the later Greek books called ‘The Apocrypha’, the Hebrew Bible as read by the Jewish people has only one line about a life beyond this one. And that one line occurs in today’s passage from the very late (2nd century BC) Book of Daniel. The text reads: *“Of those who are sleeping in the dust of the earth, many will awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting disgrace”*. | By the time of Jesus, some Jewish groups, like the Pharisees, had a well developed belief in Resurrection of the just. God’s love demanded nothing less.

We are at that time of year when the Church urges us to learn the lesson of Bede's sparrow: that this life is short and that we must be prepared for the end because 'we do not know the hour'. And that warning goes with the proliferation of writings of a sort called 'apocalyptic'; writing considered with speculating in an outlandish way about the time to come, beyond this world that we know.

Apocalyptic writing is limited in the Bible to half of the Book of Daniel, a few passages in the Gospels, such as today's, and the whole of the Book of Revelation. But it was abundant in the centuries just before and just after the time of Christ. It developed when prophets no longer spoke God's word. Now there is persecution, and oppression and many forms of violence against God's people. With a plethora of disturbing and colourful images, heavenly interpretation and intervention, and multiple references to the past when God was closely involved with his people, the seer, often portrayed as a character from the past, yet close to God, announces judgement and condemnation for the wicked and life for God's holy ones after the present trial and tribulation. The message, though veiled, is one of hope. Despite the present horrors, notwithstanding the hopelessness of the situation now, God is in control, and God's will will prevail.

However bad the situation we find ourselves in, there is always a choice: to succumb

to despair, or to hope, despite all that is happening, to cling to a belief that it will get better. History is a record of the triumph of hope. If hope had not won through, there would be no history, for no one would have remembered and recorded the past.

A story about hope, recorded by Denis McBride*: The setting is in America, amid the native American tribes; the date is irrelevant. The chief of the tribe was dying. His people had lived for countless generations at the foot of a large mountain that they considered to be holy. He summoned his three sons and in the time honoured way he addressed them. "One of you is to succeed me. To discover which of you is worthy to lead our great nation I have a task for you. For each the task is the same. You must climb the holy mountain and bring me something beautiful. The one who brings me back the gift that is the most astounding will inherit the sacred headdress and lead our people."

The next day each set out, taking a different route up the sacred mountain. The tribe waited. Several days passed. One son returned bearing, with infinite care, a beautiful flower. It grew close to the summit. It was rare and exquisite. Its colours were ever changing in the sunlight. It was stunning in its loveliness. Then the second son arrived. He presented to his father a stone, perfectly round, weathered by centuries of wind and water, it glowed, it was translucent, it seemed to reflect the rainbow and be solid and ephemeral at the same time. It was stupendous in beauty. More days passed before the third son arrived. He was empty handed. The two other sons allowed themselves a smirk. He was always a dreamer, impractical.

He approached his father. "Father, I have nothing to show you. But I want to tell you what I saw. I climbed to the summit of our holy mountain, and I looked across to the other side. What I saw was a land of green pastures, with an abundance of fruit, and in the distance a lake that looked liked crystal. And I thought that here was where our tribe should go in order to have a better life. I was overcome with the dream which I knew could be realised and I spent more time in contemplation than I realised and so I was the last to return. And I have nothing to give you."

The father replied, "What you have given is more beautiful than any flower, more precious than any rock, for you have brought back a dream that can be realise, a vision that can be grasped. You, my son, will be the leader of our people. For *{and now he used a phrase which unbeknown to him is also found in the Old Testament}* without a vision the people will perish".

Apocalyptic writing gives a vision of hope to come despite the horror of the present day. And we need such hope, such vision. We need belief in a life beyond this one. Without such a vision, we perish.

* see Denis McBride, *Seasons of the Word*, Redemptorist Pub., Chawton, Hampshire, 1991, 366.