

And God said, let there be lights in the firmament of heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and for years.

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen

This verse from the first chapter of the Book of Genesis is one of those verses that has proved to be a real interpretational minefield. You only have to Google the phrase '*let them be for signs*' to find evidence of this ---

'is it ok for Christians to read horoscopes?', 'what does the Bible say about the zodiac?', 'are horoscopes a trick by Satan?'

These are just some of the results, and I could go on.

Whilst I do not wish to be drawn too far into this particular debate- without getting into the reasons why, I feel that it is probably worth pointing out that an astrological reading of Genesis 1:14 falls rather flat. St Basil the Great seems to have agreed, suggesting that there was nothing astrological about these 'signs', but rather the signs given by the sun, moon, and stars were solely the type useful to farmers and sailors who wished to make meteorological predictions. I'm sure that this is true and valid enough, but I'm also confident that today's gospel passage has the capacity to take us a little further beyond this interpretation.

Jesus said unto his disciples, there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars

Signs... Are these signs that Our Lord speaks of in relation to his coming again the sort of signs that we heard about in Genesis? If so, the preincarnate Christ consubstantial with the Father by whom all things were made, and Christ who will come again to judge both the quick and the dead, are tangibly linked by stars. These two points are connected in an act of beautiful symmetry, by that most momentous sign that appeared in the form of a star, *His star in the east*. To slightly rework (and possibly vandalise) St. Bernard's concept of the three comings----- Our Lord's coming in creation, his coming in the flesh, and his coming again in awful majesty, are punctuated in the scriptures by this idea of signs shown in the stars.

Our own sensitivity to the significance of stars is undoubtedly heightened during the season of Advent. Not only do we have the chance to see more of them in the sky, but time and again we hear of stars in texts associated with Advent. The seventh century Advent hymn we heard sung by the choir on Saturday, *Conditor Alme Siderum* is one such example:

*Creator of the stars of night
Thy peoples' everlasting light
Jesus redeemer of us all
Regard thy servants when they call*

Creator of the stars of night---- once again we see this link appear between the preincarnate Christ the creator of the stars of night, the Word made flesh, and the second coming. And make no mistake, this particular text deals almost solely with the second coming. It goes on:

*O thou whose coming is with dread
To judge and doom the quick and dead
Preserve us, while we dwell below
From every insult of the foe.*

We must remember however, that the signs of this second coming will be nothing like the signs shown to the wise men. Whilst the stars will show signs, so too will the moon, the sun, the sea, nations, the earth itself---- the entire order will be utterly disrupted-- - we shall be changed.

This impending day seems rather to have lost some of its power in our age-- our age that is so obsessed with finding 'rational explanations' to every small abnormality or unfamiliarity. If the earth were to quake tomorrow and signs were to be observed in the sea and sky, how many Christians would turn to the scriptures for answers? Indeed, how many of us would instinctually do the same? Matthew Paris, the Benedictine monk and chronicler of St. Alban's Abbey, recorded signs that this evening's Gospel lesson was being fulfilled almost obsessively. Changes in the sea, skies, and a number of earthquakes were noted down in his *Chronica Majora*, alongside remarkably astute and advanced astronomical charts and observations- this was certainly not the work of a naïve man without scientific understanding--- these were certainly not dark ages. After a series of sea-floods, fires, earthquakes, and wars, Matthew had become convinced that the second coming was imminent in 1250.

Now, it is easy to scoff at this and I'm sure many would, not least because it is self-evident that the second coming of Christ did not occur in 1250- but Matthew Paris's vigilance was justified by a lowly God-fearing faith rarer today than it was then. Rarer, not because we are truly 'enlightened' or 'rational' and Matthew Paris was not, but rather because so many believe that by merit of our era we are truly and innately omniscient.

Henry Liddon wrote of the difficulty that many Christians face in believing in the certainty of the second coming perhaps more generously. It is a difficulty of imagination rather than reason he concluded. A difficulty to conceive that 'amid the well-ordered,

prosaic facts of our daily life, so sublime and terrific an interruption, so overwhelming a conclusion of all that we see and are conversant with' could ever take place. A difficulty to imagine all that we know being consumed away in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. A difficulty to truly envisage that *the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat.* A difficulty picturing *the earth also and the works that are therein [being] burned up.*

It is also a test of the strength of our belief. Most of what we believe is historical, it has happened, others saw, experienced, and testified---- this however is quite a different matter. It is yet to happen but still we know and pray that it will. Ultimately Liddon is right, our struggle should not come down to a matter of reason for us- we already believe in the actuality of the abnormal and unfamiliar- we believe in the Virgin Birth, we believe in Our Lord's miracles--- we believe in his Resurrection.---- But we, being so distracted by illusions of worldly permanence, cannot imagine the sudden devastating alteration of all that we know. Our Lord spoke the words we heard in this evening's Gospel lesson to his disciples as they stood in *a temple adorned with goodly stones and gifts.*

these things which ye behold, the days will come, in the which there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.

And as we are gathered this evening in a chapel adorned with goodly stones, the structure of which seems so permanent, as we go about our lives and observe particularly in Oxford, traditions, buildings, and landscapes that appear changeless and unchangeable, we must never lose sight of the world's ultimate transience. In this season of Advent especially, we must pray for Our Lord's second coming. We must be vigilant. Above all, we must *cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light* so that, when the day comes, we are not found unready or lacking.

Thou who with thine own mouth hast avouched that at midnight, at an hour when we are not aware, the Bridegroom shall come: Grant that the cry, The Bridegroom cometh, may sound evermore in our ears, that so we be never unprepared to meet him, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

AMEN.