

Column

In the rural South there can still be seen crosses and signs emblazoned with the message 'Jesus is coming soon'. In the early 1970s a story was circulating that 'someone' had picked up a hitchhiker who delivered this message before mysteriously disappearing from the backseat a few miles down the highway.

In the same decade, I knew a man who borrowed a hefty sum of money. He was not at all concerned about how he was going to pay it back because he was confident that the 'rapture' was going to happen in a year or two. Perhaps he had gotten his information from Hal Lindsey's bestselling thriller "The Late, Great Planet Earth." Regardless of what you think of his judgment, you have to say he put his money – rather someone else's – where his heart was!

The belief that our Lord's Second Coming is just around the corner is not, however, a phenomenon reserved for the 1970s. It may well have been around in Bible times. In 1 Thessalonians 3:10, we find Paul issuing a rebuke: "If any would not work, neither should he eat." It seems likely some had folded up their toolkit and were sitting down waiting for the Second Coming.

Interest in our Lord's appearing continues down to the present day. Hardly a year goes by without someone making a prediction that our Lord will come on this or that day.

The Christian Church, following our Lord's teachings in the New Testament, encourages balance on this subject. On one hand, the fact of our Lord's second appearing is clearly affirmed, but wild speculation about the day and hour is discouraged.

This balanced approach might be summarized like this: the Christian should keep one eye on the eastern sky, the other on the furrow God has given him to plow in the present. Future hope and Kingdom work must not be split apart.

The English statesman William Wilberforce sets for us an example. His Christian faith led him to campaign for two decades for the abolition of the African slave trade. In 1807, the Slave Trade Act was finally passed in Parliament.

Wilberforce's labour in the present age (and ours) will not be lost when Jesus appears the second time. Paul tells us as much in 1 Corinthians 15:58: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in

the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain” (RSV).

One way the Christian Church keeps us on task is the four-week season of Advent which begins this year on Nov. 28. In this season, we are reminded of the certainty of Jesus’ coming and the hope it engenders, but also of our calling to work until we hear the trumpet sounding. We’ll work till Jesus comes . . . may this be our song and cry in Advent and beyond.

ALMIGHTY God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life, in which thy Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the quick and dead, we may rise to the life immortal, through him who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost, now and ever. Amen. (Collect for the First Sunday in Advent, Book of Common Prayer)

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