

Sermon for Remembrance Sunday, Nov 12th, St James, 2022

'Make peace or perish?'

On Remembrance Sunday, we remind ourselves, yet again, of the great waste and cost of war but it never seems to make the nations any more effective in avoiding conflict. Our three scripture readings for today have obviously been chosen to take the sting out of past suffering and death:

1. OT; Job (Ch 19 v 21-27), patron saint of all that suffer through no fault of their own, gave us words that amount to the old saying, 'it will be alright on the night' "v 26 – and after my skin has been destroyed, yet-in my flesh- I will see God".
2. Epistle; here (I Cor 15 v 51-57) Paul imagines how the faithful dead will get their reward on the day of judgement, which he assumed to be very close.
3. Gospel; John has Jesus promising (Ch 6 v 37-40) that he would ensure that the faithful would be held close to him forever.

Reassuring as these words are, the time may have come when we need to be discomfited rather than comforted and spurred into a fresh battle, "giving ourselves fully to the work of the Lord" as Paul concludes. That is certainly the message of Brian McLaren's latest book, 'Do I Stay Christian?' I hadn't heard of 'The Fermi Paradox' or the explanation given for it, 'The Great Filter', until I got to his 20th short chapter, where, together, they form the last of ten reasons he gives for saying 'Yes' and sticking with Jesus i.e. "working fully for the Lord". He had begun his book with ten powerful reasons for saying 'No' and prominent among them was the terrible slaughter that had been perpetrated in the name of Christianity down the Centuries.

The Fermi Paradox is named after Enrico Fermi, an Italian-American physicist who invented the first nuclear reactor for generating electricity. Over lunch at a scientific conference in 1950, he asked his colleagues a simple question: 'Where are all the aliens'. Why had we not seen signs of intelligent life from other planets; there are enough of them in our galaxy?

Since 1950, we have discovered that ours may be but one of many galaxies; part of a multiverse not a universe. We have since displayed our intelligence and presence by sending rockets and satellites into space: why haven't they? One of our most intelligent scientists, the late Prof Stephen Hawking, said it was only a matter of time before we encountered evidence of intelligent creatures from space.

The Fermi Paradox may have little to do with my theme for our commemoration today but its corollary, 'The Great Filter' certainly does. It is a theory put forward to explain the absence of aliens. The thesis is that intelligent life develops both creative

and destructive powers but is hard-wired to use the destructive ones to preserve itself: therein lie the seeds of self-destruction. According to the Great Filter theory, there has been intelligent life before ours but it has been filtered out by inherent selfishness: all self-centred intelligences eventually destroy themselves. The theory is remarkably close to the scenario mythically portrayed by Adam and Eve in Genesis and formulated in the Doctrine of Original Sin.

Why did Brian McLaren find The Great Filter such an urgent reason to Stay Christian now?

Well, he suggests that our planet is set on a path of self-destruction, thus proving the theory. We do not need to look far for evidence: the UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, warned delegates at COP27 in Egypt that 'we are on path to climate hell'. Earlier President Putin had warned the world that it faces its most hazardous decade and issued veiled hints that he may unleash weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Thus, we face a second Fermi paradox: our world is now poised between two stools: his nuclear reactors can be used to destroy or save the planet, through their use in WMD or to generate carbon-free electricity. We see war history repeating itself in E. Ukraine and at this Remembrance Service, we will be vividly reminded of the local cost of war. The authors of Genesis got one picture: could John's fantasy in the book of Revelation concerning the 'end times' also be taking on a grim reality?

We could be on course to prove The Great Filter Theory BUT- Brian McLaren suggests that The Jesus Way is, in effect 'The Great Solution' (my words, not his). Staying Christian – working fully for the Lord- can buck the trend to self-destruction. The Jesus Way of self-sacrifice, of living for others, may be counter-intuitive to intelligent, self-motivated individuals and leaders of nations but The Way contains the seeds of salvation: it can snuff out the Great Filter. Greater love hath no man or woman than this; that they lay down their lives for their friends.

So, on this day and at this hour, let us vow to each other and to God that we will adhere to The Way, the way of the Cross: it offers salvation for all, not just a privileged few.

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