

**Advent 1**  
**1/12/2024**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Jeremiah 33:14-16**

**Psalm 25**

**Luke 21:25-36**

**The Time Lord**

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The Doctor is a time traveller. And if you're wondering, "Doctor who?" – precisely! In a cunningly disguised time machine, Doctor Who, the last of the Time Lords, travels from the very beginnings of all things to their very end.

Even if you're not particularly interested in the time-travel/science fiction genre, you likely know the apparent paradoxes of time travel. One of the first questions to which the possibility of time travel generally gives rise is, What would happen if you were to travel back in time and kill your own parents before you were born? The paradox, of course, is that if I kill my parents and so am not born, how could I kill them?

Storytellers have sought to think through this and other time travel paradoxes with varying degrees of success, although, in the end, none of it really makes any sense. And, often enough, making sense isn't really the point – certainly not in the case of Doctor Who, at least, where the point is more enjoying watching a crazy person and his sassy sidekick do their stuff.

What has this got to do with today's text from Luke's gospel, with its apocalyptic foretelling of the end of time? Just this: New Testament apocalyptic thought is a time machine with its own set of paradoxes and contradictions.

The word "apocalypse" relates to the uncovering of the end of the world – the revealing of the goal towards which God draws it – quite apart from the dramatic form apocalyptic thought took. New Testament apocalyptic serves as an itinerary for the end times, by which we might know where we are up to as that time approaches.

Yet the most apocalyptic thing in the New Testament is not any of its "watch-for-this" predictions of what is yet to come but the already-happened resurrection of Jesus.

Resurrection as a general "idea" was an apocalyptic concept at the centre of the religious and political atmosphere of Jesus' time. The details varied in the different accounts, but the point was not that resurrection was a miraculous return to life. At the apocalypse – the revelation of God's righteousness – a general resurrection of one sort or another was anticipated as part of a great judgement; it was how the final setting-right touched upon everyone – the living and the dead. This meant that, in late biblical times, if someone were to stop being dead, this would be a sign that the end of the world had come. By affirming Jesus' resurrection, then, the church affirms not life after death but that we have seen the end of the world: the goal towards which God is drawing us, even Jesus himself.

This is where the time machine of New Testament apocalyptic kicks in with a couple of temporal twists of its own. The first of these is that the resurrection does not reveal Jesus in the future. Unlike the Doctor and all other time travellers, Jesus doesn't move through time into the future. Rather, the future is seen in him, here and now. And if his disciples sense that Jesus continues to be present to them long after the events of Easter, then their future is also present to them, here and now in the presence of the future-containing Jesus.

More than this, the Jesus the disciples see in the resurrection is the same Jesus they knew in his prior ministry. The preaching, teaching, exhorting and challenging Jesus was the same as the Jesus encountered in the resurrection. The resurrection was merely(!) the apocalypse – the uncovering, the revelation – of who Jesus was and how he was related to God. It was not, then, so much that our once-future moves in the resurrection to be relocated in Jesus; it was always in him, even as he walked the dusty roads of Palestine. This would seem to be the point of the Transfiguration of Jesus one ordinary day on a hilltop: here, for a moment, the meaning of Jesus' extraordinary ordinariness is seen.

The paradox of the New Testament apocalyptic time machine is that the now of Jesus, in whatever condition he might be met, is the future. And the gospel is that this now future might be ours.

Now, as interesting as I hope you're all finding this to be, I admit that it is not yet very useful! What I've tried to say is that time is a central notion in the New Testament's wrestling with the person of Jesus, and that the outcome of that wrestling is a notion of the past, the present and the future which is quite confounding of ordinary understandings. To confess the resurrection of Jesus is to remember our future, and this must qualify our reading of New Testament apocalyptic such as we find it in texts like today's from Luke.

The importance of all this – its usefulness – is that, for the New Testament, a Time Lord is not one who controls time – who can wind it forwards or backwards. A Time Lord is one for whom the present time is no impediment to life. Such a one has no need to wind forwards or backwards; now is always good enough. Life does not have to wait for tomorrow (or even return to yesterday, to recall last week's thoughts).

This, of course, messes with our usual sense of time. The time which matters here is not the ticking of clocks, as it usually is in sci-fi time travel. It can be that, but this is scarcely a very interesting type of time. The biblical sense of time is entirely social and political – and so is utterly interesting if we are paying attention – and we come closer to the truth if we say that time is what passes between persons. Such time is more a quality than a quantity. The ticking of clocks is a mere medium for that human passage, that human exchange.

If a Time Lord is properly one for whom time is no impediment to life, then this means that my set of relationships here and now are not merely where I happen to live. The here and now – and not the tomorrow – is where I can be truly alive, God's will done on earth, as in heaven.

It is our failure to live in such a timely fashion which bears in on us from all sides. Time – in the mode of our current relationships – is something from which we constantly seek to escape. This is the meaning of Israel in Gaza, of Russia in Ukraine, of the rhetoric of our politicians, or of our dismissal of the insufferable neighbour, colleague or spouse. It is the meaning of lonely old souls in nursing homes, of binge-watching streamed TV series and of comfort chocolate. In our fractured relationships with each other and our lack of reconciliation within our very selves, true life is only to be found in the kind of future which comes from the further ticking of a clock. Peace, reconciliation, oneness – heaven – are always put off till tomorrow.

It is in contradiction of this that the risen Jesus is the future, here and now. In him, longing for the future is met with his fullness of life in the present. Jesus is lord over time by reconfiguring the relationships around him. He reconciles, heals, joins, uncovers new possibilities, overcomes without destroying. The future in him is now because God is able to work with our now. It is as Lord over *this* kind of time that Jesus

is Lord over all time, which is to say that the Incarnation is the meaning of the Resurrection.

And us? Unlike the Doctor, Jesus is not the last of the Time Lords, the only one who can pull off life in the midst of death. By God's grace, he is the first among a great family of Time Lords, called to live the future in the present, to find life in all its fullness in the midst of the change and decay which surrounds us. The Body of Christ is called to be timely in the way of Jesus himself.

If the point of watching Doctor Who is to enjoy a Time Lord and her sassy sidekick do their crazy thing, then the point of Christian discipleship is to *be* Time Lords. This will often make us seem crazy. For most of the world, it is well understood that if the life of heaven were our destination, we would be poorly advised to try to get there from here.

But our call is the call to the Now.

And even if it is crazy, we do our reconciling, relationship-renewing, time-bending thing anyway. This is because *our* sidekick is especially sassy: Jesus the Christ, who is first and last, who is today, yesterday and forever, and in whom we now and finally live, and move and have our being.

With a God like this, every time is God's time, and ours.

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