

Sermon for the Sunday after Ascension | 2026
By Fr. Hayden A. Butler

“The end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers.” It is difficult for contemporary Christians to hear the phrase “the end of all things” without jumping to a vision of the apocalypse. Often weaned on Christian media (of varying quality), contemporary American Christians, in particular, often assume that the ‘end of the world’ looms on the horizon as a sudden calamity that will destroy everything, providing ample opportunity for the Lord Jesus to finally return and replace this world with a new, better world. The end, we sometimes imagine, will mean the sudden whisking away of all faithful Christians from the earth, an evil Antichrist rising up to persecute the late repentant, and a series of just punishments befalling the unbelieving world. This view of the end, though, assumes that the “real” reign of Christ can only begin at a distant time, that it cannot begin until He destroys all of His enemies with plagues, and that our participation in the Kingdom does not commence until all of this comes to pass. The center of our Christian life, in short, is in the distant future.

This is not at all what St. Peter has in mind. His Epistle makes the bold claim that ‘the end of all things is at hand’ back in the 1st Century. Because we often assume the ‘end’ is a kind of termination event, however, we conclude that St. Peter and the other apostolic authors must have gotten it wrong. Even respectable New Testament theologians can dabble in the myth that the early Christians were naive, expecting a quick return of Christ from heaven, and having to reactively adjust when that did not take place. The error of this contemporary view, however, comes with our misunderstanding of the word ‘end.’ For St. Peter, “the end” does not mean “the termination” but rather “the fulfillment.” As he and the other Apostles knew well, “the end” was not merely an event, but was a feature that came with the presence of a Person they knew well: the Lord Jesus Christ. As Jesus commenced the Gospel with the proclamation that “the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand,” so those who had received that Gospel knew that the abiding presence of Jesus with His people meant that fulfillment of all things was also very near to them, even if Jesus was hidden from their sight. Wherever Christ was dwelling, so was the beginning and end of everything that had been made. As St. Paul writes to the Colossians: “For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible...All things were created through Him and for Him.”

For St. Peter, the end of all things being at hand meant that the Church was living in the last days, the final epoch, inaugurated by the Holy Spirit coming into the world. As Peter had preached at Pentecost, quoting the prophet Joel: “And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh.” As Christ had taught His disciples at the Last Supper: “And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.” With the

Spirit's coming, the fire of divine judgment had fallen on the world to test and reveal the substance and character of everything—it was the beginning of the judgment to be completed on the last day. Now that Christ was enthroned, all the powers of the world had been shaken loose, made to run to and fro and clamor even as innumerable multitudes were converted from every generation and place, becoming citizens of Christ's Kingdom. Like the three children in the fiery furnace of Babylon, the flames of the Spirit's judgment would not burn them so long as they stayed close to the Son of God, offering praise and thanksgiving in constant prayer surrounded by fire. Only what is rooted in prayer can endure the Spirit's examining fires. As the poet T.S. Eliot wrote: "The dove descending breaks the air / With flame of incandescent terror / Of which the tongues declare / The one discharge from sin and error. / The only hope, or else despair / Lies in the choice of pyre of pyre-/To be redeemed from fire by fire."

The early Christians knew they were in the last days, which meant that they were beginning to experience the Judgment that would be completed on the last day, but also the Resurrection and the Kingdom that would be perfected on that same last day. And we are still in these last days, the end times, just as they were. Wars, pestilence, antichrists and false-saviors have come and gone—the earth and sea have been troubled by the great dragon who has been cast down and now seeks to devour the children of the new Eve on the earth, knowing that his time is short. As we see these things happen in our time, we perceive that such things must happen and that they are nothing new; they are the dying throes of this world. Even so, they should not be the primary object of our attention as Christians. The fire of the Spirit has descended on this world, burning invisibly around us, but manifesting through us. For our part today, we wait with anticipation between Ascension and Pentecost, praying with the disciples of old that the Holy Spirit would fall upon us and renew us in faithfulness to Christ and participation in the Kingdom that is at hand. It is why St. Peter calls all Christians in these last days to be serious and watchful in our prayers. We cannot stop or fix the breakdown of the world that opposes Christ; we can be turned to Him and seek to turn others to Him with us. Our primary work in this world is to remain steadfast and vigilant in our prayers, to love God and neighbor, offering all of life to God and receiving eternal life in return, the life that passes with joy through the fiery trials into the joyful flame of divine love.

Yet this work has proven difficult for God's people in the past. The days of waiting are often an occasion for temptation. We will recall how, in Exodus, when Moses the Deliverer ascended the mountain to speak with God, the people grew restless waiting for him to appear again and so coerced Aaron the priest to make a golden idol for them in an effort to bring God down, squandering as they did the gold that had been delivered into their hands during their flight from Egypt. It is possible for us to have experienced the mighty works of God to deliver us from captivity to sin and death, and still to stray from Him through our wilderness pilgrimage. As we await Pentecost next Sunday, it is time for us to return to our habits of prayer, the patterns of encountering God that will guide and sustain us through Trinitytide as we expectantly look for

Christ's advent. If we have grown lax, this is the perfect time to begin again, praying as we do with the Psalmist: "We wait for thy loving-kindness, O God, in the midst of thy Temple. O God, according to thy Name, so is thy praise unto the world's end: thy right hand is full of righteousness."