Let me tell you a story with five dimensions. It’s a story about the end of the world. What we now call the first century AD was a time of fervid expectation of the end of all things. Jesus came into a culture where a lot of people were awaiting God’s sudden engulfing of history. When the early church pondered Jesus’ use of the term Son of Man he was engaging that expectation because it was a code term that cited the book of Daniel. Some of the imagery around the crucifixion – the darkness, the storm, the earthquake, the raising of the dead – is part of the same imagery.

As you may be aware, the world didn’t end in the first century. Some people say Jesus was just wrong. Others that the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and the scattering of the Jewish people was an end of the world of a kind. Others say it’s all a metaphor. That unresolved question leads to part two of our story, which begins 300 years later. In the year 312 the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. To many Christians this seemed like the end of the world – in a good way. God had finally taken hold of history, Christians were no longer persecuted – indeed, they were in charge. Heaven had come to earth. All didn’t turn out as rosy as at first hoped, but for many, perhaps most western Christians for much of the 17 centuries since then the end of the world had completely changed its character. Whereas for the early church the end of the world was the dreaded thing that might be about to happen, for the Constantinian church the end of the world was a good thing that had already happened.

Let’s move to chapter three, which we might call the less upbeat time after the fall of the Roman Empire in the fifth century and for another thousand or more years after that. Here the sense of future foreboding returned, but what changed was the end of the world was not so much a sudden, cosmic event as a concluding, largely personal event. It was less about heaven coming to earth and more about a vast judgement scene where all kinds of people were sent to everlasting bliss or eternal torment. If you look above the west door of a Romanesque or Gothic cathedral you get the message pretty quickly, and half the fun is seeing the popes and abbots and bishops heading downstairs while the weary and heavy-laden float upstairs. The end of the world isn’t any longer an interruption but more of a fair and reasonable completion of a story, where the bad get punished and the good vindicated.

But two things change as we transition from part three to part four. One is that between the seventeenth and the nineteenth century there took place what’s usually known as the turn to the subject. In other words, instead of looking to God as the reference point for all things, people increasingly looked to human beings. That didn’t necessarily mean they stopped believing in God; but it did mean that God’s action in history came to be seen more as arbitrary intervention and less as something normal and obvious. The other thing that changed was that from around the middle of the nineteenth century, people gradually stopped believing in hell. Tabloid newspapers still scream that notorious criminals should rot in hell, but in general when a person is facing their own death they’re less worried that they’ll roast in eternal torment than they are that they’ll simply be wiped out into a white space of oblivion.
So in part four of our story the judgement scene of the Gothic cathedral no longer makes any sense. Let me take you to the playground of your primary school, or at least mine, circa 1972. You’re having a wild old time, totally absorbed in tennis-ball soccer or forty-forty, and then the dinner lady, or lunchtime play supervisor as she should probably be known, rings an old ship’s bell to summon you back to the classroom. You find this action deeply disappointing, unreasonable, and tragic, and resent it to the core of your soul. In the part four version of the end of the world, God is an arbitrary, unreasonable dinner lady calling time on human existence for no legitimate reason, and Jesus’ prognostications are an embarrassing intrusion of far-fetched language into the self-absorbed world of modernity. Despite the horror of two world wars people still held on to the assumption that science and civilisation could iron out the glitches in existence and bringing the world to an end was as egregious and pointless a waste as calling time on primary school lunch break.

And so to part five, which is the last forty or fifty years. Here we have a completely new dimension. The end of the world is something we don’t resent God for doing to us; it’s become something we fear doing to ourselves. When I was growing up it was the nuclear threat: I recall the day in 1980 when Ronald Reagan was elected I really thought nuclear war had become more than likely. No sooner was the Cold War over than the ecological threat became widely understood. If we weren’t going to destroy ourselves suddenly with bombs we were going to do it slowly with greenhouse gases. The end of the world – a mysterious prophecy of Jesus, a fulfilment in Constantine, a dread in the Middle Ages, an arbitrary intrusion in modernity – has become, today, a punishment for all our industrial sins and an unprecedented challenge to turnaround management.

What are we to make of these five dimensions of the end of the world? Well, in a word – they’re all wrong. They’re wrong because they all see time in a linear way – like a journey from A to B – and it looks like a guillotine comes down before we reach B either because God doesn’t want us to reach B or because we wipe ourselves out before we get there. But time isn’t like that. I wonder if you’ve ever seen a large funnel-shaped vortex, which looks like a game or a challenge but turns out to be a fundraiser. You launch a 2p piece into it as if setting off a battling top, and the coin goes round and round and round, gathering pace and gradually descending into the vortex. It’s mesmerising to watch to see more or less maintain its trajectory without descending too much and eventually sink into the throat of the funnel where usually it goes round and round at least 20 times before disappearing.

For Christians, time is like that. We’re all being drawn inexorably towards the end, like a speck of metal toward a magnet or a coin into a vortex. The end of the world isn’t a random moment when an arbitrary God in a fit of petulance loses patience with the world and sends everyone upstairs to bed without their dinner. The end of the world is where God started. The purpose of creation was to lay the foundations and set out the ingredients for the end of the world. As soon as God involved us in the story, it was guaranteed the story wouldn’t entirely go as God would have wanted or expected. But God always wanted us to be part of the story despite that. And that’s why we were always going to need an end of the world to draw together all the good parts and redeem all the bad parts and make a true and wondrous world in which we could be God’s companion forever. Jesus is God showing us the purpose of creation and the cost of our waywardness. But fundamentally Jesus is God showing us what that end of the world will be like. Jesus is the end of the world.

This means we evaluate everything backwards. We see what place it takes in the end of the world, and we estimate its significance today accordingly. A cup of coffee and a tender hand on the shoulder offered to a colleague who’s having a hard day may seem an inefficient use of time to a work-study consultant, but it looks like the end of the world. A desk-off in which two colleagues fight about the tidiness of a shared office may seem vital at the time, but it doesn’t belong in the end of the world.
A weary afternoon spent at the bedside of a dying relative may seem hopeless and miserable at the time, but at the end of the world we’ll see it’s an icon of how God abides with us. If you’re in a quandary about how to live your life or facing a crossroads of truth or virtue, ask yourself the backwards question, does this belong in the end of the world – or is it something I’m trying hastily to squeeze in before the dinner lady rings the bell?

In all the examples I’ve given, notice the ambiguity about the word ‘end.’ Sometimes it means conclusion, like the words ‘the end’ in the last frame of a film or book. But sometimes it means goal or purpose, as in the phrase ‘the end justifies the means.’ If we’re to understand the end of the world, we need to take our eyes off the conclusion of the world’s story, and look more closely at the purpose of the world’s existence. The more aware we are of the purpose of the world’s existence, the less worried we need to be about the conclusion of the world’s story. Of course we care about nuclear catastrophe and ecological degradation. But the answer to these questions lies not in averting a conclusion to the world’s story; it lies in clarifying the purpose of the world’s existence.

And that is why Advent is all about the second coming of Jesus. When we sing ‘Lo he comes with clouds descending’ we’re not celebrating a correct prediction of the timing of the world’s conclusion or even hoping that on judgement day we’ll be going upstairs rather than downstairs. We’re saying that in Jesus God has shown us what the world was created for. It was created for perfect relationship between God and humanity, human beings with one another, and humankind with the whole created order. And in Jesus we see all these things made flesh. The astonishing thing about creation is that, rather than skip straight to the end of the world, God has given us time to shape and colour and influence and inflect what the end of the world will finally be like. Because the end of the world will be made up of stray elements of this world – the cast-offs, the remnants, the pieces left on the floor when the sewing machine of our driven existence has done its work. Jesus became one of those cast-offs to show us how God makes the end of the world out of what we in this world reject and tread down.

And so our Advent faith is not that we know the day or the hour, but that we understand the purpose of all things. We know there the end of the world is real, but we need not fear it. We need not fear it because we have already seen it. The end of the world is Jesus.