Two friends were talking into the early hours, when suddenly the one visiting noticed a set of bagpipes in the corner, and said to his host: ‘I didn’t know you played the bagpipes?’ To which the host said, ‘I don’t. This is my Speaking Clock – I’ll show you.’ So he picks up the bagpipes, inflates the bag, and then emits the most horrendous wailing noise at a painfully high volume. Immediately, there is a banging on the ceiling and an angry voice shouts, ‘Cut it out, you idiot – it’s three o’clock in the morning!’

You know what time it is, says the apostle in our epistle reading. It’s time for you to wake from sleep. Why? Because ‘salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers.’ Notice the linear concept of time encapsulated within that sentence. You can plot the three events on a time line: i) when we became believers, ii) now, iii) salvation - the future putting right of all things. Time is a straight line, pointing ahead. In the immortal words of Groucho Marx, ‘Time flies like an arrow: fruit flies like a banana.’ Time flies like an arrow: it has a forward trajectory. And because we have been brought up with that view of time – it is just part of the western mindset – we don’t notice what a revolutionary concept it is. Most pagan cultures have a circular view of time. Like the Chinese calendar, which rotates the year of the dog, the year of the dragon, the year of the rat, etc., they tend to have a notion of time that is circular. The Stoics have a similarly cyclical view of history, which has even infiltrated one of our Christmas carols: ‘with the ever circling years comes round the age of gold’. The ages go round and round – they never actually get anywhere.

And the reason why a pagan concept of time tends to be circular is because the seasons of nature are circular. You get spring, summer, autumn and winter following one another inexorably.

Personally, I am a big fan of pagan festivals. We have a particularly fine Spring celebration here in Oxford. The druids mark the Summer and the Winter Solstice.
Surprisingly, we don’t really have an Autumn Festival – unless you count the rain dance otherwise known as the August Bank Holiday.

Pagan festivals celebrate the variety of life – its different seasons, colours, temperatures, foods, and possibilities. They mark the natural rhythms of life, and give expression to our closeness to – and integration with – nature.

The only problem with them, of course, is that the rhythms of life are also the rhythms of death. The cycle of the seasons is a cycle of decay. The only problem with pagan festivals is that, while Nature is renewed every spring, that is not true of any of its constituent parts – such as people. Such as the people we love. Every winter sucks us a little further down into the maelstrom of our mortality. As Jerry Seinfeld said, babies may look cute, but ‘do not be deceived. Remember why they are here – they are here to replace us!’

The pagan gods don’t care about individual people. We do. As Edna St Vincent Millay puts it:

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.
So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind:
Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely. Crowned
With lilies and with laurel they go; but I am not resigned.

People cannot live with circularity. Circularity confines us within a temporal horizon that is always closing in on us.

Christians believe that time is a straight line, time flies like an arrow, time has a trajectory, time is getting somewhere, time is not confined or confining.

Why? Why this different view of time? Because the resurrection of Jesus Christ has broken into the otherwise inexorable cycle of life and death and decay – and opened out the circle into a line.

History is going somewhere.

Tim Vine is a comedian known for his one-liners, one of which is: ‘I waited up all night trying to figure out where the sun goes every evening – and then it dawned on me.’

‘The night is far gone’, says St Paul, ‘the day is nearly here’. History is going somewhere, okay – but where is it going? Answer: It’s going towards dawn. It’s going towards day. It is going towards light, and warmth and clarity and safety and hope – all the things that we associate with daylight.
The implication is, of course, that we are currently in darkness. It is hard to look at the lethal exploitation of migrants, and not agree with that. It is hard to look at modern slavery, and not see the cogency of that. It is hard to look at the bereavement of someone who has been married for sixty years, and not agree with Paul’s diagnosis. It is hard to look at someone with a degenerative disease, leaving them unable to communicate in what should have been the prime of life, and not agree that we live in darkness.

Most contemporary world-views offer no hope of anything different – merely a recycling of the same ingredients, the same current mix of ecstatic and tragic, noble and despicable. Most contemporary world-views offer no way out of the circle.

Peter Cook:

I am very interested in the universe – I am specialising in the universe and all that surrounds it. I am studying Nesbitt’s book, *The Universe and All that Surrounds It: An Introduction*. He tackles the subject boldly, goes through from the beginning of time right through to the present day, which according to Nesbitt is October 31, 1940. And he says the earth is spinning into the sun and we shall all be burnt to death. But he ends the book on a note of hope, he says, ‘I hope this will not happen’!

That’s a typical secular vision of the future: where are we going? We are headed for extinction, and there is no hope in us.

But our epistle reading this morning offers us a future with hope. Where are we going? To the coming day. To the coming day, the nature of which we glimpse in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. To the dawning of a day that is free from the inexorable cycles of death and decay. To radiant re-embodiment within a restored and resplendent world. To a world free from the injustice that so denigrates the victim and so corrupts the culprit. To a world in which love is the only recognised currency.

When my father died, I was asked to preach at his funeral. The night before the funeral, I couldn’t sleep and spent the whole night doubting the resurrection and asking myself, ‘Who are we trying to kid?’ I tried to analyse what argument had so robbed me of my faith and my hope, and I realised that the only real substance to it was that I couldn’t imagine a world free from death. And that is not a very good argument: why should reality be limited by the capacity of my puny imagination? I remembered that, when I was depressed, I couldn’t imagine ever waking up without that horrible hopeless feeling in the depths of my stomach. But it did go. I don’t wake up like that now, and I haven’t
for the past thirty-five years. Just as my depression didn’t last forever, the cosmic depression will not last for ever, either, says St Paul. The appalling messed-up-ness of our world is only temporary. The night will pass.

In the meantime, we need to be people of the light. We need to be for our world the first streaks of dawn in a dark sky. We need, by the way we live for more than our own pleasure, by our self-control, by our own faithfulness and purity of mind and body, by our own peaceable spirit and our unthreatened delight in the flourishing and success of others – to point to a world that is at harmony within itself because it is at peace with its Creator, and to help others to believe that such a world is on its way.

I’m afraid I can’t remember which comedian said this, but the future, the present and the past walked into a bar. Things got a little tense.

When we take communion in a few minutes’ time, we look to the past and remember the events that catapulted time out of its otherwise eternal orbit and gave it direction and impetus and hope. We look to the future putting right of all things and the flooding of creation with the presence and glory of God. And we eat the edible light and drink the liquid love that are transforming us in the present into people of transparency, translucence and transfiguration.