These readings are speaking of new heavens and new earth and the passing away of the old, and in a sense this could create conflicts for us living as we do in a world that is actually sort of oriented toward the present and the future in a very material sense.

One of the great challenges of Christian people is to live with one foot in one world and one foot in another and bring integration into their personal faith understanding. This is often not done. We could even say that full integration is almost impossible today given all there is to know. And no one--no one person, whoever it is--could possibly be really integrated in terms of all that is needed, all that has been experienced, in human life. Take, for example, a great mind like Albert Einstein, who was a great physicist but who wrote gibberish when it came to philosophy. Take, for example, many religious people who are very devout and seem to know a great deal about God and the way they practice, but they know nothing about something else—let’s say, science. And yet for the Church we really do have to proclaim the gospel in a way that is not only understandable but attractive. This is a word used by Paul VI in Evangelii Nuntiandi. The gospel must be attractive, which means we have to sense the attraction ourselves, number one, but also we have to be well integrated, well developed, in regard to our own personal lives, in regard to the world we live in.

Now it’s very possible and probably very true that the people for whom the Book of Revelation was written originally felt the world very hostile. It is also true that religious people continue to feel that the world is very hostile, and there is a sense in which it is very hostile. Nowadays the hostility is not so much in terms of physical persecution, but it is more in terms of intellectual persecution torpedoing the beliefs that we have. That’s true. If you listen to the Iranian people, the leaders of the Iranian movement--Ayatollah Khomeini, who is now passed away, but his successors--you get the very feeling that the world is very hostile to the real, truthful beliefs of the Muslim people, at least the Muslim Iranians. But then if you go to some other country you get the same feeling from their
leaders. If you go to the Orthodox Jews, the same thing. Eastern Orthodox Christians, same idea. Evangelicals, same thing. Jehovah’s Witnesses, same thing. Many Catholics, same thing—this feeling that the world is hostile and aggressively agnostic. Well, let’s say that perhaps that’s true.

How are we going to deal with this? I think Jesus is trying to say that we deal with this by acknowledging it but also by sharing the real truth that makes people free. If we become defensive and therefore closed-minded, I don’t think we’re going to be able to do that. I think what Jesus is trying to say is if we accept the truth that makes us free, we’ll be able to share that truth with others. He says, “Notice the fig tree or any other tree. You observe them when they are budding and know for yourselves that summer is near. Likewise when you see all these things happening of which I speak, know that the reign of God is near.” The reign of God is not something which we see in full bud or bloom. We’re not actually supposed to. Part of God’s plan is to let people see the signs and respond freely because God is a gentle God, and God wants to invite everyone and yet force no one. So it’s a delicate matter. And we can be the leaven in the world if we are quietly and genuinely convinced of the goodness of God and the truthfulness of the kingdom.

Defensiveness will not work because defensiveness causes people to also become defensive, and then we have a world locked into very specific, tight groups. This will not lead to the kingdom of God. On the other hand, open-minded acceptance of everything will not do either because that will lead to a dilution of the truth which is really revealed, which doesn’t come from our own human activity, which doesn’t come from our research, that doesn’t come from our reflection, but is really given to us as a gift. So if we keep in mind that we have this very delicate mission, and if we realize that we are the ones who are entrusted with it—the apostles of today—I think that we will be able to do great work for God in a very simple way. “The heavens and the earth will pass away, but my words will not pass.”