

Perhaps the scariest thing I have ever seen was at most an inch long. No more than an inch long. Just a few millimetres tall. And dead. It was a spider that had died. On a desk. Of its own accord. No helping hand from arachnophobic me personally sending it to Jesus. Just expired. There it was, looking like it was ready to rip your arm off. But entirely lifeless. Who knows why it had come to shuffle off this mortal coil just there on the desk? Maybe it saw my handwriting and freaked. Perhaps with poetic justice it had choked on its own venom or suffocated in its own silk. Who knows?

An inch-long eight-legged mini demon that is never again going to move of its own volition is not great raw material for the scariest thing in the world, I know. What you do to arrive at peak petrifying is what my ex did- not sweep it off the desk into the bin as you should but take zoom-lens photos of it from all angles. Then gleefully make me watch a slideshow of them. Tells you everything you need to know about him, and reason enough for him to be my ex. There are others.

What a zoom lens does is make that inch as big as you are; gives you a fly's-eye view of a spider and *that* sight is enough to make your heart stop cold. The beasts have huge fangs. Yes they do. They don't just sport eight legs: they have eight- or more-eyes. And they have speed. And malice. Spiders are beyond terrifying. I would say try zooming with your phone next time you're near one, but I don't want a rush on funerals just now. Take my word for it. Spiders are beyond terrifying.

Some say small is beautiful. That's because they haven't put their glasses on. Take an up-close look and see what you took for miniature magnificence is actually hideously grimly hairy leggedly eight-eyed swallow you in one bite spidery horror.

Things look very different close up.

TV presenters must hate 50 inch HD TVs. Wrinkles. Liver spots. Orange peel skin. Pan-stick make up. Who'd have thought it?

Online daters know to beware of blurry photos, they don't tell the truth. And they're out of date by at least 10 years. And usually not even of the person that posted them.

Middle-age eye sight is a blessing until you realise it's happening; once the optician's fixed it you're unlikely to want to go near a mirror again. Your face is much better fuzzy and out of focus.

Because things look very different close up.

If you don't want to see anything unpleasant, step back, keep your distance, don't rest your eye on anything for long, keep moving, don't concentrate and don't come near. Things look very different close up. Most of the time, all of what we see is the surface from a distance, like the craters on the moon, the canals on Mars, the red spot of Jupiter or the golden Sun. Which is nothing like close up.

For a Christian close-up is a blessing and a curse. Because your faith has gifted you with magnifying glass perspective; your faith makes you see the world close up; your faith has fixed your vision and now you always see the world in super HD. And you can never unsee it. Faith is not an optical illusion or a distorting prism, a fairyland filter: it's a zoom lens, you're seeing it as it is and what you see sure ain't pretty.

If you've listened to the readings in church or sometimes just opened your Bible at home, you will know that there are large chunks of the scriptures where it would appear that whoever wrote what you are reading had finally tottered over the edge. Spent too much time fasting and inhaling incense and temporarily gone away with the pixies. Inadvisably eaten foraged food and now lost in a terrible hallucinatory fever. Even just stood too close to someone smoking something strange at the bus stop. We get a lot of these writings in the lectionary this time of year.

You know the sort of thing I mean.

Daniel dreaming of lions with eagles wings and beasts with iron teeth and ten talking horns and beryl-bodied lightning faced flaming torch-eyed burnish bronze-legged men shouting really loud. Or Zechariah with his red and sorrel horses, spectral blacksmiths, bronze mountains and supernatural olive trees. Or Ezekiel's living wheels, four faced living creatures, eye-covered angels, clouds of glory, crystal domes and amber loins. Or even St Paul when he's hearing archangels trumpets sound, being swept up into the clouds and putting on the imperishable body. That sort of thing.

And that's before we open the book of Revelation with its seals and scrolls and bowls and plagues and dragons and horsemen and beasts and angels and serpents and lambs and brass locust scorpions and sulphur lakes and seas of glass and portents in heaven and heavenly cities. Whatever St John had for tea, leave it on the plate.

This sort of scripture writing is known in the trade as Apocalyptic. The alarming thing about these visions, the 'oh no' component is that they're not predicting horrors to come. That's what we've come to think they are- malevolent Mystic Megs. But no. The word Apocalypse means 'revealing what is hidden'. Those revelations are not telling us about things that are waiting to happen. We're not being warned about things that will occur in the distant future at the end of the world. Rather, we are given the view from heaven; things that are here and now for those with eyes to see them. If you have the faith, you have those eyes. You have taken the red pill. You have woken up. Eyes wide open, seeing clearly, on maximum magnification.

What you see with faith eyes will be very scary. The world we have made is a cruel uncaring place. Inhumanity is found wherever humanity is. We live in a vale of tears and drown in our sorrows. It's all too much, so generation after generation has distracts itself with success, power, wealth. They numb the pain, dial down the unease. Until faith opens our eyes and we see that success, power, wealth are moth-eaten, rotten, corroded, rusted illusions.

Faith lets us look up close, and we will be terrified by what we see.

It takes an iron will few of us have to not respond to this clarity of vision by hunkering down, keep ourself to ourself, our family and select friends; better avoid looking too close and try only to see what we want to see. We've snatched a glimpse at the real world and we'd rather not know. Problem is, once you've seen it, you can't unsee it. It doesn't go away if you ignore it; it doesn't stop being there if you do something else; it doesn't disappear if you push it to the back of your mind.

Circling the wagons smaller and smaller is our response but that's pretty much what Jesus teaching tells us not to do

*"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same..."*

*...Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.*

Faith has opened your eyes, and you can't unsee.

But.

Here comes the up side. Here comes the saving grace. I know you're waiting for it.

Your 20/20 faith-vision also lets you see the good side that you wouldn't otherwise see. With God-goggles on you will notice that not everything small is spider-scary when you look up close. There are beauties and delights and goodness and graces in unguessed, unexpected places that you won't see without the zoom lens of faith. Your eyes of faith will skip past the speck in your sister's eye and see how beautiful those eyes are. Your ears of faith will filter out the grating gammon his mouth is spouting and hear a vulnerable beating heart behind the bluster and bravado. Your eyes of faith will make you weep for the irreplaceable beauty the world lost in the back of that refrigerated lorry in Essex. Your ears of faith will hear the exquisite melody of each individual human voice, singing to the beat of eight billion hearts pulsing the same rhythm in perfect sync.

When faith has focused your eyes and tuned your ears you will start to want to work to rid the world of all the other scary stuff that makes you want to circle the wagons, pull up the drawbridge, crawl under the bedsheets, close your eyes, stick your fingers in your ears and sing 'We're all going on a...' Sometimes its that bad, I know. But it doesn't have to be, and it won't always be.

That is the main message of all that scary scripture stuff, this is what apocalyptic wants you to understand. Sometimes its bad. *Really* bad. Bad in the way only we can make it. But it doesn't have to be, and with God in charge it won't be.

Close up, the world is scary. Be brave. God will triumph. He sees smaller than we ever can *and* He's the only one who can see the whole picture. He's seen how this ends. It ends with him: the Alpha and the Omega; the beginning, and the end.