

2 Thessalonians 3. 6 – 13

Luke 21. 5 – 19

Fr Alex

What would you do if you believed the world was about to end?

The first followers of Jesus must've thought the end was coming, with the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem and its temple only a few decades after Jesus foretold it. The utter annihilation of everything they had known and taken for granted.

The early church had to work out what did it all mean? How could they stay hopeful and endure in the face of persecution and hatred? What kind of future did God have in store for them?

If we thought the end was coming, perhaps we'd make an effort to be with loved ones; say that thing that we were always too afraid to say; perhaps reconcile with an estranged family member.

The reformer Martin Luther had a rather original idea: apparently when *he* was asked what he would do if he knew the world was going to end tomorrow, he said: "I would go out today and plant an apple tree."

What an interesting thing to say. Unfortunately the evidence suggests that he probably never said it. But it's still a defiant image of hope in the face of a seemingly hopeless situation. Of placing your trust in a future that you might never see, or might never exist at all; but not letting go of the hope that there might be something more.

There's also another aspect to it: who is the one saying that the world is going to end tomorrow? Can they be believed?

Interestingly, this saying about the apple tree seems to be much more ancient than Luther: in fact there's some evidence that it comes from the writing of a rabbi who survived the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

In the face of such devastation, this rabbi encouraged people to keep longing for a Messiah, but didn't encourage chasing after one. He said, "If there was a plant in your hand and they should say to you, 'Look, the Messiah is here!' Go and plant your plant, and after that go forth to receive him."

In other words, don't believe everyone who claims to have all the answers.

That's exactly what Jesus warns of today: "Beware that you are not led astray; for many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and, 'The time is near!' Do not go after them."

And people have been doing just that for two thousand years, ever since Jesus said it. There has been no shortage of claims about the end times; every great war, every earthquake is taken as one of Jesus' signs that the world is about to end.

But for all that, there is something about the global situation we find ourselves in today that makes it more difficult to ignore those voices of doom. With our modern technology, the stakes are so incredibly high, and the increasing violence and political instability puts us all at terrible risk. And the environment gives us too many signs that all is not well, and that the future is very uncertain.

With each Remembrance Sunday I've started to feel that our acts of remembrance are becoming a bit more desperate than hopeful; that too many people are not remembering the terrible mistakes of the past, and seem determined to repeat them.

How do we stay hopeful, in such a time as this? What can *we* possibly do that has any value in the midst of so much uncertainty?

We could look around the world and see all the false prophets who claim to have all the answers; we could see the news of the wars, insurrections, natural disasters; the signs in the environment of seemingly insurmountable problems.

We could look at all of this and see in it the unmistakable signs of the end, and think that there's no future, and nothing we can do about it.

Or we could take Jesus at his word: "Do not be terrified ... not a hair of your head will perish." We could go out and, like Martin Luther, plant our apple trees, no matter how futile it might seem, by persevering in faith and good works; little acts of love and charity that can grow and blossom into a much more hopeful future – a future that Jesus promises is ours, if we can endure.

The composer Arnold Schoenberg also had something to say about apple trees; he said that a true artist is like an apple tree; when he feels the need, he simply bursts into flower and fruit without ever thinking first about the market price of apples.

Perhaps a true Christian is the same; not stopping to think about how small and insignificant our contribution might seem, but just going out and bearing fruit anyway. Enduring in hope, when all seems hopeless.

Those first Christians came through the disaster of the destruction of Jerusalem, the beautiful and seemingly eternal temple, the end of their entire way of life; they were persecuted, put to death, hated by all.

But they endured, because they believed in the promise of Jesus that no matter what goes on around us, with him we have a future. With him, even death cannot have the last word: there is still more to come. He showed us that himself, when the temple of his own body was destroyed on the cross: and he entered into a new and wonderful life beyond the limits of our imaginations.

So let us not look around us at the world and be dismayed. Let us not think that what we can do has no value, and can make no difference. Let us keep planting our apple trees, in whatever way we are being called to do so.

Let us keep putting our faith in that tiny seed of hope, that even though it goes into the ground and seems to die, can grow into the most beautiful and abundant fruitfulness, beyond price, and beyond the limits of our imagination. Amen.