

Sermon for 13th November 2022, Year C, Remembrance Sunday

Preached at St Michael the Archangel, Smarden

Luke 21:5-19

Sermon

There is a legend that Martin Luther – the church Reformer of the sixteen century – once said that if he learned that the world would end tomorrow, then today he would want to plant an apple tree.

It's not entirely clear what he meant by this. Some have said that it shows the importance of caring for God's creation, even when it seems like a lost cause. Others have claimed Luther is telling us to do whatever makes us happy, since we have no idea what is coming tomorrow. This seems unlikely to me; 'eat, drink and be merry' was never really Luther's style.

Instead, I suspect Luther was trying to demonstrate that even in the midst of great suffering and turmoil, even at the end of the world, our wellbeing and salvation still lie in the best hands – God's hands. As Jesus himself put it in our gospel reading earlier, "not a hair of your head will perish".

As he approached the end of his own life, Jesus was trying to reassure and encourage his followers to stay true to his message of compassion, forgiveness and love even though he knew that they would soon experience an enormous amount of suffering.

There are wars coming, he admits, natural disasters and pandemics, plagues, and famines. Even that magnificent, beautiful temple in Jerusalem that was rebuilt by King Herod just before Jesus was born, that too will soon be torn down and destroyed, Jesus warns. And this did indeed happen, in 70AD, when the Romans destroyed it in order to crush a Jewish rebellion.

For Jesus's disciples, things could hardly get any worse. But somehow, it did. It became personal. *You* will be arrested and persecuted and thrown into prison, says Jesus, and some of you will die because of what and whom you're standing up for.

But do not be terrified, he continues, because that's when you will have the authorities right where you want them. That's when they'll have to listen to you. Just when everything looks so dark, when lies and falsehoods appear so pervasive and persuasive, when war and pandemics and disasters seem never-ending, when people think you're done for, that's when you have an opportunity to testify, to show everyone another way is possible.

Wait, what? Everything is falling apart, but somehow, according to Jesus, this is a good thing.

You really have to have a lot of faith to see this from Jesus's perspective, but effectively he's saying that there are some things that it is absolutely worth risking death for.

For Jesus and his followers, death is not the end, but only the beginning of an eternal life with God. So, what's truly important is not staying alive at all costs, but staying true to what is kind, and compassionate, and generous, forgiving, and good, whatever the consequences. Jesus is saying that even as civilisation seems to be collapsing around you, with everyone looking out only for themselves, stay true to who you are, who you have become, and be ready to show others the same way.

This is, I think, why Jesus tells his disciples, 'Don't bother trying to prepare words in advance'. It's not that we should all expect a miracle download of exactly the right speech at the right time, but if we are a person who has truly taken to heart the selfless sacrifice and love for our neighbour that Jesus has been teaching – if it has gone into our inmost being and become a fundamental part of who we

are, then we will never have any problem finding the words to explain why we are willing to give up our lives for those we love. It's simply who we are, and what we do, no matter how much suffering is inflicted on us.

You'll probably have noticed by now that I believe this passage from Luke's gospel is as relevant for our modern times as it was in the early years after Jesus's death.

Today, we are remembering all those who gave their lives in service of their neighbours, their families, and friends, and indeed for many they would never meet, in their own country and abroad. These were men and women who experienced the nightmare reality of wars that destroyed whole towns, cities, and nations, and yet they persisted. They didn't turn aside or seek an easier path. They stood up for what they believed was right, they defended the weak, they spoke up against injustice, and they suffered grievously for it. Even in the concentration camps, they continued to give up their own lives to save others. They were refined by fire and became a people the world can always be proud of. "No one has greater love than this", says Jesus, "than to lay down one's life for one's friends". Well, some laid down their lives even for complete strangers.

And now in twenty-twenty-two, we who are alive today are still hearing the call of Jesus not to be terrified, though we hear of wars around us, famines, and floods, and we live through pandemics and plagues, economic doom, and rising costs of living. Now it is *our* turn to serve one another, to discover who we truly are, what kind of character we have in this crisis, to see if we can resist the temptation to become more selfish and keep things back just for ourselves.

Can we instead, no matter the circumstance, find within ourselves the selfless compassion and love and forgiveness that Jesus taught us, so that, across the world, all humanity might be transformed, one by one by one, until wars and cruelty, oppression and injustice are no more. This is the way, says Jesus, we will gain our souls. It begins in our own hearts.