

Address for 14 November by Nigel Guthrie

It is very good to pause on Remembrance Sunday and remember those from our parish who have died in war. The names of those from the two World Wars, beautifully inscribed on the wooden panels at the back of church, bring home to us the dreadful reality of armed conflict, 'the pity of war' as Wilfred Owen named it. Their experience may seem a long way from our own, yet it is still a forceful reminder of the horror into which the world can quickly descend. And as well as remembering, it's also very good to pause and thank God for the relative peace in which we live and to pray for those who are living in the midst of horrendous conflict and violence today.

Remembrance Sunday has a solemn air to it but today's gospel reading takes the angst to a whole new level. Chapter 13 of St Mark's gospel is one of the most striking examples of apocalyptic writing in the New Testament. It's genre of writing that first appears in the period before the New Testament, as represented by parts of the book of Daniel. And we find its most fully worked out form in the final book of the bible Revelation – which is sometimes known as the apocalypse of St John. I would recommend that you sit down before reading that book – and preferably have a good commentary at hand to help you make sense of it all!

The Cambridge dictionary defines apocalyptic as 'showing or describing the total destruction and end of the world, or extremely bad future events'. Many early Christians thought that the end of the world was coming soon – Jesus himself seems to have shared that belief. Although significantly alongside foretellings of the end of the world there are also warnings, at several places in the New Testament, that no one knows except God knows when it will happen. One of those warnings is later in Mark chapter 13 'about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father' (Mark 13: 32). So even if Jesus did believe that the world might end soon he didn't claim to know when it would happen and you may have noticed that he didn't answer when the disciples asked him about it! We should be very wary of anyone who claims to know the timing of the end of the world, although there are plenty of people on the extensive lunatic fringe of religion who do so.

The construction of Temple of Herod the Great from around 20 BC was an astonishing feat of engineering. Some of the stones which Jesus pointed out were

truly massive – around 50 tons in weight. This Temple must have looked awe-inspiring and seemed indestructible. That the temple could be ransacked and left in ruins must have seemed incredible – even though that is exactly when the Romans sacked Jerusalem in AD70 as a response to Jewish revolts. It must have seemed as if the world had come to an end for the Jewish population there. The Temple which had seemed so solid and permanent was all but destroyed and its treasures were carried off along with the hopes of the people.

So Jesus warns us not to be taken in by that which seems permanent in this world and to live in such a way that we are ready for the Kingdom which is to come. He also warns us to expect wars and rumours of wars, together with earthquakes and famines.

Now you may be finding such language strangely familiar as there have been plenty of apocalyptic images used recently around COP26 summit. And there can be little doubt that if the causes of climate change are not urgently addressed there will be ‘extremely bad future events’. The world itself may not end, but human life is set to become brutally hard in many places and possibly extremely violent as mass migration begins from uninhabitable regions. Indeed, the presence of delegates from many countries who are already suffering the devastating effects of a changing climate has been a moving and hopefully energizing feature of the conference.

The question for Christians is always how we should live best in between the present times with their uncertainties and challenges and the glorious heavenly future which God has prepared for us.

The Letter to the Hebrews refers a lot to the Temple and its sacrifices which were repeated year after year. In this, the most polished piece of writing in the New Testament, the author contrasts the repeated sacrifices made in the Temple with the one sacrifice made by on the cross Jesus. And whereas in the Temple only the High priests enter the inner sanctuary, the sacrifice of Jesus opens the gate of heaven so that all believers can enter. So whether it was written before or after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the letter became significant in allowing Jews who had become Christians to know that the spiritual substance of their old faith could be incorporated and understood within their new belief system.

But alongside this rhetorical argument for the superiority of the Christian faith the writer also describes beautifully and succinctly how we should live in these in-

between times: 'Let us consider how to provoke one another to good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.'

So the writer saw the role of Christians as that of encouraging others, by meeting together and urging each other on to do good. I very much warm to that message because it is very hard to be a Christian on your own. Indeed, is it really possible at all without others? We not only need the encouragement of others in our faith, but also we need their differences so that our own gifts and vision can be tested and honed and used within the body of believers. Thank you for your encouragement and fellowship in our faith, and may God bring you the encouragement and strength you need to live faithfully in these 'between' times.