

**November 13, 2016.**

**Pentecost 26**

(Isaiah 65:17-25, 2 Thess. 3:6-13, Luke 21:5-19)

**The end, what end?**

This past week has been an unsettling and somewhat fearful one, for our world with the shock election of Donald Trump as the next president of USA, and for us here in Kempsey with bushfires burning around us before summer has even begun. Although temporarily pushed into the background, the war against Isis in Iraq and Syria continues. We have also had recent earthquakes, first in Japan and then in Italy, and frightening predictions of the affects of global warming for us in Australia in a decade or two. From space, destructive asteroids are forecast to eventually hit our planet, and tomorrow we shall see a super moon—closer to us than it has been since 1948. We know that human beings now have the power in stored nuclear bombs and shells to kill all human beings and much other life on earth. Do all these things point to the end of our world?

**( Someone wearing sandwich boards saying: “Repent! The end is near!” enters ringing a bell.)**

It is easy to become depressed when we look around at our world. Is the only alternative to try to ignore it all, and hope it will go away? But we are Christians, followers of Christ, how are we to respond?

When I realised that the gospel reading for today was about the end of the world, and that I was preaching, I wished I could ignore it. Instead I felt a responsibility to grasp the nettle, so to speak, and deal with it.

Over the last few weeks (not on All Saints Day), our gospel readings have been following Jesus’ last journey to Jerusalem. Jesus has now arrived, and each day is teaching the people in the temple precincts and answering their questions. Luke introduces the topic of the end of the world by using where Jesus is—Herod’s great temple in Jerusalem which took 46 years to complete. Set on a hill, it must have looked magnificent to residents and visitors alike, with its massive walls, gates, porticos, and buildings of cream stone adorned with beautiful stones.

Large buildings can impress us, and even inspire us, but Jesus responded to the people’s admiring remarks about the temple in a shocking way. He foretold its destruction, which happened in 70 CE when the Romans attacked Jerusalem. The people listening to Jesus were appalled, and asked the obvious question—when will this happen? Jesus explains that

there will first be wars, earthquakes, famines etc. and also suffering for his followers. Prophets will appear and claim to be the Christ and that the end is near, but they are not to be followed for the time will not be yet. Jesus ends on a positive note, that in spite of the horrors to come, his disciples who faithfully testify to him and his love for them, will not be forgotten but will be safe and saved by God.

Although many Christians in the first century expected Jesus to return soon, Jesus taught his followers (Luke 12:40 and Mark 13:33 etc.) that they would not know when this would take place. In the second letter to the Thessalonians which was read this morning, Paul rebuked those who refused to work and instead were living off others. Possibly this was because they believed Christ's coming was imminent so they might as well just hang around and wait.

From time to time today, people belonging to certain sects preach that the world is about to end. They persuade some of their members to stop working, and gather in the particular place where Christ is expected to come.

The world has not ended yet, but drastic events and changes have taken place which can resonate with the prophecies of Jesus. They can be disasters such as earthquakes, tsunamis, bushfires and so on, or changes such as the election of Donald Trump, or even changes in our church. Last Sunday I noticed two significant changes. The average age of our congregation is gradually rising each year, but in the morning service, with two baptisms, we experienced small children walking around making noises. Our quiet prayerful comfort zone had been invaded! In the evening I attended, as I have for some years, the combined service in All Saints Catholic Church, but it was different. No longer were we praying for unity between our denominations, but rather we were praying together, affirming our common baptism and being encouraged to follow Christ in our daily lives in the world. These changes may not be precursors of the end of the world, but they are the end of the life we have been used to, and the possibility or start of something new.

I read recently a letter from some Christian residents of Mosul in Iraq, who had suffered the shock of a forced exile from their city about a year previous. They said, "It was like being in a dream. It took time to believe". It was a wrenching away from the land that had nurtured them for nearly 20 centuries. They were now simply refugees, crowded into a camp. They felt revulsion in the face of such injustice, and

didn't want to accept what had happened. Eventually they began asking themselves, "Why did this happen?" Then, "What does God want of us? What can we do about all this violence?" They had experienced the end of the world as they knew it. They could have just given up, but instead they began to look for a fresh way forward.

Each of us as individuals will also experience times in our lives when there is an end—a time of great change, which may be expected or not expected. These changes will include such events as leaving school, going to University, entering the work force, or moving from where we live. Later in life we may be faced with changes resulting from marriage, having children, changing jobs, being made redundant at work, and eventually retiring, and perhaps being able to do more things we enjoy, or just feeling useless.

As we age we have to accept that we cannot always do the physical work we used to do. I was talking with a woman the other day who was trying to bend some steel with a hammer. She suddenly said to me that she could not do it, she was too old and her legs hurt. She then told her daughter she was going to lie down! The daughter finished the job.

We may come to a time when ill health makes it necessary to leave our familiar home and enter hospital or an aged care facility. We can accept this as an end and give up, or see it as an opportunity to witness to God's love for others in prayer and action.

The Religious Community to which Fiona and I belong, has owned for many years a large 3 storeyed house at Ham Common, on the outskirts of London, which was once the mother house of our Community. It has now been sold. Sisters have been moving out and last Tuesday the removalists came and took the furniture to a smaller house further from London, at Gerrards Cross. It has been a traumatic time for the Sisters there, especially the elderly ones and one who is 100. They are leaving not only a building they know, the beautiful large garden with its ancient mulberry tree, walled vegetable garden, rose covered arches and green walk, but importantly the chapel in which they prayed daily for many years and where they, Fiona and I made our life vows to God. They are facing an end for them. What will be their response? How will they follow Jesus, witness to Christ, in a new place?

On Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem, he could have turned in on himself, grieving and despairing about the possibility of his death and the end of his work on earth. Instead, he continued to be aware of the lives and

needs of people around him. When approaching Jericho he stopped when he heard the cry of a blind man and asked that the man be brought to him. Jesus fulfilled the man's request to see again. He left his former life of begging and followed after Jesus. Shortly after, while walking through Jericho, Jesus was no doubt surprised to catch sight of a tax-collector up a tree, but immediately declared that he would eat with this man, an outsider, at his house, and brought him salvation.

Some days later in Jerusalem after the Last Supper, Jesus went at night into the garden of Gethsemane, where he agonised in prayer, asking God to save him from the suffering to come, but finally coming to peace and the acceptance of God's will. When Jesus was captured, he healed the high priest's slave whose ear had been cut off, stopped further violence and enabled his friends to escape. Even on the cross, Jesus showed care for the thief hanging alongside of him, promising him eternal life. No matter where Jesus found himself, he revealed God's love and care for others.

I believe that the recent upheavals we have seen and experienced in our world, our church, our families and our own lives are not necessarily signs of the end of the world. We do not know when the world will end or how it will happen. What we do know, is that we are called to continue faithfully on our Christian journey, following Jesus, throughout our lives. This is not always easy, as it wasn't for Jesus, but the Spirit is always with us to help us. We are, like Jesus, to grasp the opportunities that arise for us wherever we are, and show God's loving compassion for others. This is our vocation as Christians even when we think "what's the use" and are tempted to give up, believe no one cares about us, or feel too tired or sick to be bothered to thank others or help them.

In two weeks we come once more to the season of Advent, a time of preparation for the festival of Christmas when we remember the first coming of Jesus, to be one with us. Today we may be attracted to long for the end time when Jesus will come again, and God's reign will be over all the earth, as described poetically in our reading from Isaiah. But there is no need for us to sit and wait for Jesus' second coming, for Jesus is with us wherever we are, and his loving presence is revealed every day, when we open ourselves to him and allow his Spirit to guide our lives.

*Sister Helen CSC*