

People across the world are concerned about the future. What will happen to them. What will happen to their children and grandchildren. What will happen to their wealth and their security. What will happen to the environment.

When you think about it, there's an awful lot to worry about. And we, as human beings, do a great job at worrying about things. Whether worrying about things actually makes any difference is something we can all ponder... but it's hard to avoid worrying, at least some of the time.

The evangelist Billy Graham once stood up at a rally and said, "I've read the last page of the Bible, it's all going to turn out all right."

It's all going to turn out all right. No matter what the problems of our world, our church, our families, or our lives, it's all going to turn out all right.

I understand that many people, when they're reading a book, skip to the last pages to find out how it ends.

Sure enough, if we turn to the last page of the bible, we can see the assurance that Billy Graham knew and shared, for ourselves. The last chapter of the book of Revelation tells us *"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse... There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever...."* (Rev 22:1-5)

But we don't need to read the last pages of the bible to find out that it's all going to turn out right, because the whole of scripture tells us about God's plan for the world, the plan which will restore all things to him. God's plan which we first read about in the book of Genesis – in the first few pages of the bible.

And while we can be assured that it will all work out in the end, we are limited in our understanding of exactly what 'the end' is like. As Paul tells us in his first letter to the Corinthians 'No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him'" (1 Cor 2:9)

As followers of Jesus, we know the hope that Jesus gives us through his life, death and resurrection. As the apostle Peter says in his first letter "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade." (1 Peter 1:3-4a)

As followers of Jesus, we have that wonderful hope – the living hope, the sure and certain hope – but we live in a fallen world. A world of many good things, but also a world of sickness, disease and death. A world where people do suffer. A world which isn't fair. And a world where, as followers of Jesus, we don't get special privileges or treatment. In fact, as highlighted in our gospel reading, it's often the opposite: Jesus said, "...they will seize you and persecute you. They will hand you over to synagogues and put you in prison, and you will be brought before kings and governors, and all on account of my name... You will be betrayed even by parents, brothers and sisters, relatives and

friends, and they will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me.” (Luke 21:12,16-17)

Why is that? Why will everyone hate us because of Jesus? Because the world’s ways are not God’s ways. We often mention that difference and pray about that difference in church, but we don’t often explore what that means.

The world’s ways are not God’s ways.

Blessed are the meek, Jesus said, for they shall inherit the earth. (Matt 5:5) That’s God way – but the way of the world is that the meek are often pushed aside.

The last will be first, and the first will be last – according to Jesus, but according to the world it’s generally first in best dressed, the early bird catches the worm, or even the quick and the dead.

The way of the world is to say that the Lord helps those who help themselves, but it is precisely those who could not help themselves – the blind, the lame, the leper and so on – that Jesus helped. And that he calls us to help too.

The world’s way is to fix the problems of the world for ourselves, but God wants us to turn to him. To put our trust and hope not in ourselves, our knowledge, our technology and our wealth, but in him.

And what a hope that is: We heard in our reading from Isaiah “See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind.” (65:17). That is our hope. We need a new heavens and new earth because this one is broken. We broke it. We, human beings turned away from God, and broke God’s creation.

There is much that is good about the world. There is beauty, there is pleasure to experience, there are good relationships to have with each other, but there is also a lot that is not good. There is suffering, crying, pain, death and mourning. There is guilt. There is shame. Things that are beyond the ability of humans to eliminate. Things that God, and only God, can remove.

We may have read to the last page of the bible and learned that it’s all going to turn out all right, and we may long for that to happen – but people have been waiting a long time for it to happen – since the time of Jesus... since the time Isaiah... since the time people first turned away from God. And for all that time, people have wanted to know when God will put things right.

In our reading from Luke’s gospel today, the disciples asked Jesus ‘when?’. They’d been admiring the temple – this is the temple whose rebuilding we heard about in our reading from Haggai last week, but which had been furthered renovated by King Herod only a generation or so before.

The disciples had commented about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God, but Jesus had told them that the temple would be destroyed. And the temple wasn’t simply a building or a church – it was the centre of Jewish religious, political, cultural and even economic life. It was the place where they held that God himself was present.

“Teacher,” they asked, “when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?”

I’m sure this wasn’t just idle curiosity... I’m sure they were also wondering, what’s going to happen to you, Jesus? What’s going to happen to us?

But when, Jesus? When? We need to be ready!

Jesus didn't tell them when... instead, he responded with a warning "Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he,' and, 'The time is near.' Do not follow them." (13:5-6)

Despite what the disciples had asked, Jesus didn't warn them about being ready for the destruction of the temple, instead, he warned them about being beware of people who might deceive them.

We need to watch out that we're not deceived. Throughout history, many people have claimed the gift of prophecy and predicted the apocalypse. I've remarked before that Wikipedia has a handy list of predicted dates of the end times. 206 of them when I checked this week – and every one of them has proved incorrect so far.

So, rather than re-asking the disciples' question "when will this be?" today, we need to focus on how Jesus' answered them.

We need, Jesus says, to watch out, to stay on guard, so that we are not deceived. But then he goes on to talk about various things – calamitous things, world-shattering things – that will happen:

"When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away. Then he said to them: "Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be great earthquakes, famines and pestilences in various places, and fearful events and great signs from heaven." (21:9-11)

People often take Jesus reference to wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes and famines as the signs that the disciples asked for, when they asked "when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are about to take place?" People track such things, and claim them as signs of the end – you now, the man on the street corner, with the sandwich board emblazed 'Repent! For the end is nigh', but Jesus isn't mentioning these things as signs of the end, he is telling the disciples – and us – of things that will happen before the end. Things that will continue to happen as they have throughout history. Things that we shouldn't be deceived by and things that we shouldn't be distracted by.

If you look at Jesus' list, there's nothing new there: wars and rumours of wars; nations rising against nations, and kingdoms against kingdoms; earthquakes in various places; famines. They are all facts of the world. They are not signs of the end of the age, but they are facts of the current age. Throughout human history, wars, famines and natural disasters have been with us. And I think to the list that Jesus gives, we could fairly add droughts and floods and bushfires and pandemics.

They will always be with us, and we as Christians are called to do what we can, to make peace, to feed the hungry, to cope with natural disasters – and the disasters and tragedies brought about by the actions of human beings. We must never ignore the things of this world and the suffering we see, but as we attend to the things of this world, to making peace, to feeding the hungry and tending the sick, we need to remember that those things are not the end in themselves, but rather the way in which we follow the example of Jesus, and serve God.

Our reading from Isaiah gives us a vision of the ultimate fulfilment of God's plan. A vision which came around 700 years before Jesus, and one that we can still look to with certainty today.

The prophet Isaiah brings us a vision of the hope the God offers, the dream of God for a new world, renewed and healed. "See, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind." The pain and suffering of this world will not only cease,

but will no longer scar us. The lasting impacts of whatever trauma we may have suffered, or whatever we have done wrong, will be gone.

Instead, in the new creation we can be glad and rejoice forever in what God will create, it will be joyful, for us, and for God.

Isaiah tells us that the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more. He gives us a vision of a world where people live together in peace. It is a world where people have the right to live in their own homes without fear of someone more powerful forcing them out and taking it over. It is a world where everyone has enough to eat, clean water to drink, clothing, shelter, relationships in caring community. It is a world where people can walk the streets without the fear of violence and where people are valued for who they are. It is a vision that foreshadows Jesus' victory over sin and death.

It is also a world where the earth is valued and creation enjoyed, nurtured and cared for. Where the accepted ways of the world will be swept away – the peace of that world is beyond our experience: The wolf and the lamb will feed together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

Around 700 years after Isaiah shared that vision of the world to come, Jesus was born. As his ministry began, he declared, the kingdom of God had drawn near. And in his life and ministry, we can see Isaiah's vision of the world to come beginning to be fulfilled. Jesus cured disease. He made the lame walk and the blind see. He reached out to the outcast and the undesirable. He showed us that death was not the end.

We, like people across the world, are concerned about the future. What will happen to us. What will happen to our children and grandchildren. What will happen to our wealth and their security. What will happen to the environment. What will happen to our church and our community.

We are human, and it would be foolish to try and 'not worry' about such things, but we, as followers of Jesus, can look beyond doom and disaster, know that things, even if they are beyond our control, are not beyond God's control. We can be assured that Jesus, in his death and resurrection, has done all that is needed to bring us into God's renewed world – to the vision that Isaiah shared. We just need to keep our hope in him, and be confident in the face of people and events that would deceive us and lead us astray.

We must remember in the face of all the problems of our world and our lives, that God has a plan for creation: God will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. So let us be glad and rejoice forever in the hope that we have today, tomorrow and always.

Amen