

The words of Jesus are timeless.

One of the ladies in the Zoom group on Thursday referred to the earthquakes and other natural disasters that we have in the news.. She was not suggesting Jesus was referring to any particular earthquake of the 15,800 so far this year. Nor would I. We only hear of some of the more destructive ones. They are a fact of the world's life as are the 23 tropical cyclones worldwide this year. You can talk about climate change but as the words of Jesus tell us, they have been around a long time. We are challenged by the famines in Sudan, the Palestinian territories, Myanmar and Nigeria as agencies seek support.

It is the same with 'wars and insurrections'. Jesus spoke from his nation's history. He would know of the Babylonian exile, the Persian period, the Maccabean resistance the previous century and the Roman invasion of Judea. He was aware of the hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans. Jesus could make a fair judgement that such things would continue to happen. He made his assessment with the politics of Judea at that time. There are commentators who do the same today. The letters to the editor suggest most of us make our own assessment about issues in our society; what is the cause and the solutions.

By the time Luke wrote his gospel, sometime in the late 70s, the temple, and indeed Jerusalem, had suffered destruction at the hands of the Roman occupiers. We could think Jesus made his prediction because of his divinity. We remember he was fully a man with the limitations of humanity. In those limitations he did not sin. Jesus had come to Jerusalem. He wept over it, "If you had only recognized the things that make for peace." He knew of would-be leaders, calling themselves 'the Messiah' ready to lead an uprising against the Romans. He was crucified instead of a one such leader. Every time people wanted to declare him to be the Messiah he told them to be quiet. Their understanding of Messiah was different from his. His prediction about the temple was from watching the activities of the political leaders in Jerusalem.

The temple, the most beautiful building as one could imagine, occupying the central place in the national life, religion and imagination of God dwelling among his people would be torn down. (Wright p.251) This dramatic action would be a prophetic sign of the Roman power over a revolt which "had far-reaching political, religious, and cultural consequences." (Wikipedia) Jesus' prediction would have been sad.

We may understand the sadness when churches are closed and sold. Ann and I went to a service at Holy Trinity, Sebastopol in the diocese of Ballarat. It was the final service to be held there. A document was read to say it was deconsecrated and no longer to be used for Christian worship. Indeed, the property had been sold and the Sikhs are building a temple of their own.

The Sikhs reflect something of the changing religious face of Australia, as our Anglican culture as we knew it declines at the present. It continues in places where Asian and African Christian immigrants fill the pews.

The Church is called to be "a holy temple" (Ephesians 2:21) to be a dwelling place for God. It is not a building. The first letter of Peter tells us, 'we are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that we may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.' (1 Pet:2:9)

For some people it may lead to persecution. Luke knew such persecutions had taken place. He wrote of the early martyrs in the Acts of the Apostles. His friend, the great missionary, Paul had been martyred in Rome. So it has gone on through history. Some people died because of political or theological disputes. Even so, names of martyred men and women who lived and taught the way of Jesus are found in our history.

In our own time we have accounts of persecution of Christians in Muslim countries, because of the mixed religious cultures in India and Pakistan, or the police control of the Church in China. The Nigerian government says there is religious freedom under their constitution but in the last few weeks both the Pope and the American President have spoken of the persecution of Christians in the country.

Are we safe from any kind of persecution in Australia? We hear of the Jews maligned, not because of what is happening in Australia but in Gaza. Australians maligning Australians because of religion and politics abroad. Various groups are growing that seem intent on violence. The more recent generations, Y (Millenials), Z and Alpha, are less instructed in the Christian faith. The flourishing Christian communities where the church building was the centre of a social life, are disappearing.

This sounds grim. The words of Jesus to his followers in the Jerusalem sounded grim. During his ministry he told people to take up their cross to follow him. They knew, even at that moment, to follow him could cost their life. It is no less for coming generations. There are signs that the younger adults are discovering the church and its worship. In spite of the insistence on atheism in communist China the number of Christians has soared.

Luke's account of that day in Jerusalem ends with encouraging words from Jesus. "By your endurance you will gain your souls." One translation has, "The way to keep your lives is to be patient." (Tom Wright) Another puts the sentence as "Hold on for this is how you will save yourselves." (GNB)

The warnings of Jesus are timeless. His encouragement is timeless, so is his promise, we will share in the glory of his kingdom.