10am HC Sunday 16th November 2025
Malachi 4:1-2a, 2 Thess 3:6-13 and Luke 21:5-19 – Holding on by staying focussed, being fearless and remaining faithful

Last month, I was at the site of the ruined St Andrews Cathedral; the largest church ever built in Scotland, but ransacked by a mob in 1559 and abandoned as a ruin two years later.

Then there's the twin towers of New York's World Trade Centre, and Notre Dame's gothic roof, destroyed by fire in 2019…

All of them iconic buildings, the destruction of any part of them inconceivable, until it actually happened.

To Jesus' followers in 1st century Jerusalem, it was equally unimaginable that the fabulously splendid and beautiful Temple would be destroyed. And yet, look up Luke 21, v6 (you can find the page on the pew bulletin), and you can see that, speaking publicly to his followers in the Temple rather than privately to the disciples, Jesus warns that ***"not one stone will be left upon another"***. Jesus' followers understandably want to know ***"when will this be?"***

Jesus does not give a direct answer to this question, or to the supplemental question ***"and what will be the sign that this is about to take place?"*** Instead, Jesus initially looks far beyond the fall of Jerusalem in AD70, when the Temple was first burnt down, and then razed to the ground.

With Jesus' answers to the questions in v8 to v11, it is as if Jesus is pulling back the camera to show the bigger picture, and what is to come in the longer term. For Jesus, the fall of Jerusalem is only one of many events that must take place before the time of the End, when the King will return, to take his kingdom and to judge the earth.

But first Jesus gives, in v8, a warning to his followers not to be misled by people who claim they come in his name. False teaching is no less dangerous now than in the middle of the first century, and we should be wary of those who argue that the church must change its teachings, and who are not preaching what Jesus taught. We need to heed Jesus' call to "***beware that you are not led astray … [and] not go after them"***.

Jesus continues to ignore the questions about when the Temple will be destroyed, and about the signs of its imminent destruction, going on to say in v9, of ***"wars and insurrections"*** that ***"these things must take place first"***. These things will not happen before the destruction of the Temple, but they will have come to pass by the time of the End and Jesus' return as King.

In v10-11, when Jesus says ***"nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom"*** Jesus is looking beyond the fall of Jerusalem and much further into the future; the future that we are living in now.

He says there will be "***great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues"***. These are the between times; the times between Jesus' death and resurrection and Jesus' return; the times that we are living in.

And Jesus isn't wrong about wars, and about famine, and about disease. For as we have seen in Yemen, and in Sudan, and in Gaza: when war destroys the infrastructure of daily life, food insecurity and the failure of basic healthcare are never far behind.

But then, in v12, Jesus suddenly pulls the camera back into focus on what is to happen to Jesus' followers in the shorter term, in the next few decades. For Jesus says to them, ***"before all this occurs they will arrest you and persecute you; … hand you over to synagogues and prisons and [bring you] before kings and governors because of my name."***

And Jesus wasn't wrong: in Acts, Luke records James (one of the Twelve) having been brought before Herod Agrippa the First; and Paul being before Gallio, the Pro-Consul of Achaia, and also Governor Felix, and Felix' successor Governor Festus, and also King Agrippa, as well as Paul being brought to account in synagogues and thrown into prison numerous times.

And again, Jesus' warning that those first believers would be betrayed, even by those who were closest to them, was not wrong. We know, not just from Acts, but also from Roman historians like Tacitus and Pliny the Younger, that when Christians in those early years were persecuted by Roman emperors, they were betrayed and denounced by family and friends, as Jesus himself would very shortly be betrayed by one of his inner circle.

But Jesus intends his warnings to inspire faith, endurance and hope. When Christian believers are seeking to hold firm to doctrine, and facing hostility, and coping with betrayal, they need to stay focussed; to be fearless; and to remain faithful.

And when we feel overwhelmed by all the unrelentingly bad news on our screens, Jesus' warning offers reassurance that the world's grim realities do *not* mean God has given up directing history. There will always be a country or a city suffering from a rebellion or a coup; somewhere rocked by anarchy or ruined by gang warfare; a Myanmar, or a DRC, or Haiti … but just as Jesus knew this would come, Jesus will keep his promise to return and to bring in his kingdom.

So when we hear of wars and famine and outbreaks of disease, we must not panic. Instead, we pray. Pray for those suffering in the aftermath and those seeking to help. And on a practical level, offer support, individually, and as a church, through charities like Christian Aid and mission partners such as Simon Guillebaud and Great Lakes Outreach in Burundi.

Instead of allowing the fear of what is happening in our world to cast us into despair, we do what we can to bring God's hope and healing to the people and places that are suffering.

In whatever might befall us, it is always the Holy Spirit who is our mainstay: our conscience and our Comforter. Perhaps you find it surprising that Jesus urges his followers facing opposition to ***"make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance"***, and promises "***I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict"***?

Luke shows us what this looks like in Acts, whenever Peter or John are speaking to the crowds or to the court. And if we know what we believe, and why we believe it, the right words will come to us when we are under pressure.

Jesus promised in v19 ***"by your endurance you will gain your souls"***. When we feel alone or apprehensive about the future or about all that is happening in our world, we need to encourage one another with reminders that Jesus said to his followers ***"do not be terrified***". In our small groups and when we pray together at 9am, in person or on zoom, and when we gather on zoom for Compline, we are showing the endurance that will see us through to that salvation that Jesus won for us on the cross.

We hold onto our salvation by staying focussed on following Jesus and not being led astray by false leaders. By being fearless, rather than despairing, despite the state of the world.

By remaining faithful and being confident in the words of Jesus we will endure to the end.