

Two Visions, Two Possibilities: Pessimism or Optimism

(Sermon preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist on November 16th, 2025 – Isaiah 65:17-25 & Luke 21:5-19)

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It's easy to feel pessimistic and overwhelmed as we look around our world. Democracy eroding, wars continuing, natural disasters, the climate changing, more and more people experiencing food insecurity and homelessness. A church with falling numbers and dwindling funds. It can seem like the world is a dark place. Such situations have caused many since the beginning of time to think the world is going to end. Predictions have been made, people have waited, and yet the sky has not fallen in yet. The world in both its beauty and its pain continues.

Our bible readings speak into just that kind of experience.

Isaiah writes in a time of crisis for his community. Despite the difficulties he proclaims a vision of hope, a new heaven and earth, a peaceful place where all live in harmony, a future for a group of people who are despairing. It is a vision of peace, where all are fed, enjoy wellbeing, share and live in peace with each other and where God dwells in their midst.

In what seems like a huge contrast Luke records Jesus speaking about calamity after calamity. War, insurrection, famines, plagues and persecution. Many have used this description to look at the world and see signs of its final destruction. Jesus was actually predicting the destruction of the temple, which happened about forty years after Jesus died. However, is the message really about doom and gloom and destruction or is Jesus calling us to something else, to another way of living in the world?

Giving his disciples and us a dose of reality Jesus warns to not go following after false teachers who say they come in his name and proclaim the time is near. Instead Jesus says, life might get hard, you might be betrayed by those who trust, you might get harassed and victimized (something Jesus knew about) but don't panic and don't be afraid. What you need to do in such times is to trust, trust God. Trust God will give you the words you need to say to answer those who question your way of understanding the world, trust that you are held in the hand of God. Don't let your responses to the hype and horror of accumulating disasters be determined by clever media people or seemingly too good to be true preacher types, rather let your response be determined by God's Spirit which is within you. The future is in the hands of God, and we are in God's hands too.¹

Jesus tells us that this will pass, that in caring for each other and the earth we will get through, that God will give us wisdom in the midst of the fray and that we just need to act counter culturally and not be pulled into the hype we find in the media. It seems to me that Jesus is less worried about the quantity of time we have left than the quality of life that we will lead. By endurance you will gain your souls. Persistence and perseverance seem to be the order of the day.

¹ Taken from William Loader's discussion of Luke 21:5-19

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So how might we make sense of these two visions, these two possibilities in our context? It seems to me we have a couple of possibilities. We could look at the texts and the world around us with our pessimistic glasses on and be overwhelmed, or we could look at things around us through our optimistic lens.

If we choose the pessimistic lens, we are sure to be overwhelmed by the pain and suffering around us and lose hope and find ourselves following those who preach doom and gloom and hopelessness. We will end up not really caring about anything much and living a life that just has ourselves as a focus. That is not a Jesus or Isaiah approach.

Isaiah proclaims a vision of beauty and peace even with the backdrop of chaos. Jesus calls us to persevere in the midst of turbulence, and not give up. Hold fast to faith and the knowledge that God is with you, God will protect you, God will guide you and give you what you need. God is in the world constantly transforming it and us.

We are not called to ignore the injustice and pain we see in the world, rather we are called to join with God to transform such pain into peace, into beauty, into wholeness and into wellbeing for all, the vision that Isaiah spells out for us. You and I can't transform the world, but we can play a small part in its transformation as we continue to care for others, as we do our bit to care for the environment, as we love God and neighbour.

Mother Teresa said we cannot all do great things, but we can do small things with great love.

God does not abandon us, God is with us in the difficult times. We are called to live by the law of love and not fear. We are called to be a people of hope. We are called to be a people who trust. We are called to be a people of compassion.

So, when everything around us feels daunting and scary, in our individual lives, as we contemplate the future of this church and the future of those who will come after us, let us be God's companions and join God in bringing transformation, in bringing a vision of peace and wellbeing to all around. As we think about the decision we face about our buildings and indeed the future of this church community, let us not be daunted by the big task, rather let us act with hope not fear, with compassion and love. Let us not insulate ourselves from the world and its reality, let us be bold and do what we can to help join God in transforming this world to a place where all are housed and fed, where enemies become friends and where all live well and in peace.

Endurance in the tough times, will gain our souls. Amen.