

Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8

Nation has risen against nation, kingdom against kingdom, there are earthquakes and famines, and the zombies have emerged. It is the end of the world.

If you have made it this far and are alive here this morning, please stand up...

You're lost in the wilderness and you're very hungry. You see some berries but aren't sure if they're edible. You can eat them, or walk on. If you walk on, stay standing. If you choose to eat them, please sit down. Unfortunately they were poisonous. If you sat down, you are out.

Next choice - you desperately need water. You find a stream that looks clear, but it's risky. You can try to filter it through a sort-of-clean spare shirt, or just keep going. If you choose to filter it and drink, raise your hand... Congratulations, your skills seemed to work and you're ok. If you didn't drink, you are out.

Final choice: it is freezing, and you come upon a small fire that has clearly been recently tended. Someone else must be nearby, but there might also be zombies. You can stay by the fire and hope all is safe, or keep walking into the freezing forest at night. If you keep walking, raise your hand. It gets so dark you can't see, and so cold that you get frostbite. You are out.

If you're still standing, congratulations, you've made it through 24 hours of the zombie apocalypse! Now, what on earth is a zombie apocalypse doing in a sermon? Good question. It's partly Jesus' fault, setting the scene with that dramatic end to our gospel reading, and partly because I must watch too many movies and that's where my brain went.

But there is something about end-of-the-world scenarios and survival challenges that fascinates people. Survival camping is quite a popular category of video on Youtube, so if it does seem like the zombies or aliens are closing in, and you need someone to buddy up with to build shelters and forage for food, I advise looking them up!

Now of course zombies or aliens are imaginary scenarios, but what is very real is that life is full of bumps and challenges of greater or lesser magnitude, and we need to be able to navigate them. We need to have a skill set that will see us through, and a personality held steady and grounded in something that can hold firm through any storm. When life is not all roses, where does your confidence and security lie? When the world is caving in around you, when health or relationships or finances or jobs give way, where do your feet land?

This is where we all need to have a spiritual skill set. Our orientation, even in the face of disaster and fear, needs to be towards living into being who God longs for us to be. The fruits of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control - are more important than the various other skills we find ourselves cultivating.

Our world tells us to cultivate the clever retort, or power, or putting our neighbour into 'the other' category, to cultivate a high salary, impressive hobbies, or a confidence that your opinion is right, but God asks us to cultivate humility and reliance on God's love. God asks for peace to be more than lip service but instead something we build ourselves by not perpetuating tension or discontent. Easier said than done. But a spiritual skill set of the fruits of the spirit will enable us to have hearts full of hope, even when we face disasters of all sizes.

Let me ask you a question. I won't ask the cause, but can you raise your hand if you have been provoked this week? As I thought!

Now think about how you responded, and can you raise your hand again if your response to being provoked was either love or good deeds?

Not quite so many of you! Being provoked must have been part of daily life when the letter to the Hebrews was written, just like it is now, but the author reframes it as a suggestion for how to build each other up in spiritual maturity - "let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds". To provoke kindness or grace out of each other is another way of saying, let's intentionally

encourage each other. And to be able to do that will take practice, and time, building trust and communication.

But how? If the zombies are approaching, how can we provoke each other to love and good deeds, instead of despair or fear? How do we cultivate our spiritual skill set?

You know the saying, you are what you... ? If you've got a bulletin to hand, I invite you to turn to the collect for today, at the top of page 3.

"Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life."

'hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest'. That is the how. 'You are what you eat' applies to what you hear and read and learn as well. If you are steeped in scripture, in the wisdom and beauty of liturgy, in the love of God and neighbour, you will find yourself becoming what you eat. If we provoke one another to love and good deeds, wrapping our minds in the things of God, we will develop a spiritual skill set that carries us through.

The youth invited me to EYC a couple of weeks ago and asked how I kept faith in hard times. I didn't answer very well in the moment, but it got me thinking, and on reflection I realised that my bedrock is thankfulness. Even when something is caving in, there is so much to be thankful for. So much that we have been given. So much that has brought us to today, made us who we are, surrounded us with support and love. And the Eucharist that we celebrate every week is all about thanksgiving. *Eucharistia* means thanksgiving. We offer praise, offer our wealth, offer our skills, we join the hymn of the angels, acknowledge the awesome holiness of God, all as thanksgiving. Not only that, but giving thanks is a spiritual skill that can be cultivated and nurtured, a solid ground for your feet when the world is shifting.

What is your skill set? What carries you through?

So here's a vision: let's be a church that provokes each other to love and good deeds. A people who are what they eat - who hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the fruits of the spirit, in thanksgiving. A beacon of hope in a weary world as we approach the end of the year. Even if the zombies are coming, they don't stand a chance, for we shine with God's light which no darkness can overcome.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.