

Standing: Edith Cavell

Speculation about the end of the world sounds strange to most people today. But not in Jesus' time. There was an expectation that before the end there would be a time of political and cosmic tribulation – and that would be associated with the coming of the Messiah. So it's not surprising that Jesus has something to say along those lines.

And there are traditionally-minded Christians today who see in world events evidence of some of the things mentioned in the Bible and feel that “the end is nigh”. I must say that doesn't much excite me: I'm conscious that people have been saying similar things throughout Christian history. I would be more concerned that we pay attention to the human potential for ending the world as we know it. The threat of nuclear war may have subsided since the time I was growing up, although the weapons are still there; but now we have rapid climate change disrupting the processes which support life on our planet. Today's reading from Malachi, with the day of the Lord *burning like an oven*, has disturbing echoes in the increasing prevalence of wildfire; while average temperatures continue to increase, the sense of urgency appears to be decreasing.

But Jesus (aided by Luke) focuses more on what he says will happen before the cosmic tribulation occurs. At the beginning of the gospel, Jesus called disciples to *follow him* in his ministry. Now, shortly before his own arrest and death, he warned his disciples that they are called to follow him in this regard as well: *They will arrest you and persecute you... You will be betrayed ... You will be hated ... they will put some of you to death*. They can't say they haven't been warned!

And we can't say we haven't been warned, either. Thankfully we live in a part of the world where, if we are open about our Christian faith, the worst we can expect to suffer is ridicule; or for some, workplace discipline. But at our baptism we were marked with the sign of the cross (the sign of Jesus' death) with words similar to, *Fight valiantly, as a disciple of Christ, against sin, the world and the devil*. This is *spiritual warfare*: resisting what's wrong; standing up for what's right. And sometimes that means swimming *against* the tide of society, of what everybody else does.

In a consumer culture, products need to be attractive; marketing pushes only plus points. But Jesus isn't into consumerism: don't follow me, he says, unless you are prepared to suffer for it. He's not saying that suffering is a good thing; but within it, and particularly in the way we approach it, lies an opportunity to give evidence of the influence God has on our lives. That might be in qualities like patience and perseverance – *By your endurance you will gain your souls*. Another translation talks about *standing firm*.

We sometimes talk about *taking a stand* for what we believe in. That can be done in a rather aggressive way, from a position of power. But Jesus is talking to followers who will take their stand in a place of human weakness: in the dock of religious and civil courts. Nevertheless, this will be their *opportunity to testify*. Remarkably, he even tells them *not to prepare [their] defence in advance* – the implication is that that will give Jesus a greater chance to direct what they should say.

That put me in mind of Edith Cavell – subject of a recent exhibition at Norwich Cathedral, marking the 110th anniversary of her death.

Edith Cavell grew up in Swardston, where her father was vicar. She spent five years working as a governess in Belgium, before returning home in 1895 to care for her father when he became ill.

Nursing her father back to health is said to be what inspired Cavell to train to become a nurse. Her tutor remarked that she was often late and unreliable. Edith proved her wrong when she moved to Belgium and began to pioneer new nursing techniques.

When the First World War broke out, Edith Cavell returned to England for a holiday in Norfolk. She declared: *At a time like this, I am needed now more than ever*, before heading back to the front line in Belgium to continue her work in hospitals treating all soldiers who needed help, regardless of their nationality.

The conventional story is that Edith began to work with the Belgian underground intelligence network, helping to smuggle more than 200 Allied soldiers into neutral Holland, keeping her work secret from her fellow nurses who served under her.

However, having analysed previously embargoed files in England and Belgium, Dr. Helen Fry claimed in 2023 that Edith was both a spy and a spymistress: volunteering her services to coordinate an intelligence network behind enemy lines. This view is refuted by others who have studied the Belgian movement, maintaining that any handling of information was opportunistic.

Either way, the Germans uncovered the network and tried Edith for treason with 35 others in August 1915. Most were sentenced to hard labour – but not Cavell. Despite an international plea for mercy, she was shot dead by a firing squad at the age of 49.

Saints are valued for what they mean to us: different constituencies can give rise to varying interpretations of their lives and deaths. The war propaganda machine saw Edith as a nurse cruelly murdered by an immoral enemy. Christian accounts have presented her primarily as a Christian nurse who lost her life seeking to preserve the lives of all who came under her care. For Helen Fry, she is but one example of a number of women active in our intelligence services, neglected by history. Others might question the prominence she has received, given that she was but one of a whole network of courageous activists, mostly Belgian, who deserve to be better remembered.

The recent exhibition sought to present Edith in her own words: from her letters and notes in Christian books which she clearly found meaningful. Because of the need for absolute secrecy, I don't suppose we know whether she wrestled in choosing her course of action (with its jeopardy and abuse of her Red Cross status) or whether it was clear to her from the start. But we do get a striking picture of her quiet, calm assurance at the end, as she faced what she, contrary to public opinion, considered to be the just penalty for what she had done. She didn't want to be considered a martyr, but simply as *a nurse who tried to do her duty* – I wonder what that duty consisted of for her?

Like the followers Jesus addressed, Edith had the opportunity to say something as she faced death – or to allow Jesus to speak through her. *Tell my loved ones*, she directed her counselling minister, *that my soul, as I believe, is safe and that I am glad to die for my country*. And this, on the eve of her execution: *Standing as I do in view of God and Eternity, I realise that patriotism is not enough, I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone*.

Through Edith Cavell's words and actions, including the debatable aspects, I hope that the words and wisdom of Jesus may be heard. For each one of us is to try to do our Christian duty in whatever calling God has given us. We're called to make our difficult decisions in the spirit of Jesus. We're to be prepared to suffer for his sake. We're to love even those who act against us. And we're to seek to allow Jesus to speak through us: our living and our dying.