

Being Church in the Last Times

Tuning in to the ‘Two Aeons’

The New Testament’s teaching on the ‘last times’ cannot be accessed without prior acquaintance with its use of the image of the ‘two aeons’, a notion whose proximate background is the world of Jewish apocalyptic. The first or old aeon is the age inaugurated by the Fall and marked by the universal reign of sin and death. The new aeon meanwhile begins with the coming of the Messiah, which breaks into the continuing old aeon in such a way that those who are in Christ already taste the ‘powers of the age to come’ (καλὸν γευσάμενους θεοῦ ῥῆμα δυνάμεις τε μέλλοντος αἰῶνος, Heb 6:4). Among a range of instances of ‘two aeons’ language, Eph 1:21 stands out for its clarity: at the Father’s right hand, the exalted Lord Jesus has been elevated above all rule and authority and power and lordship and above every name that can be named ‘not only in this age but also in the one to come’ (οὐ μόνον ἐν τῷ αἰῶνι τούτῳ ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τῷ μέλλοντι). Those unfamiliar with the conceptuality of the ‘two aeons’ are advised to check out Bishop Anders Nygren’s lucid account in his commentary on Romans, where he employs it as key to grasping the type-antitype relationship between Adam and Christ in Rom 5:12-21.¹ Hermann Sasse’s article on αἰών, αἰώνιος in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* is a resource unsuited to the fainthearted while being required reading for all who study theology at a graduate level.²

¹ ANDERS NYGREN, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1949)16-25

² TDNT I:197-209. ‘In its view of the two aeons the NT is in essential agreement with 1st century apocalyptic. The framework of eschatological notions is broken only by the fact that the * * is no longer merely in the future. Believers are already redeemed from this present evil * (Gl. 1:4) and have tasted the powers of the future * (Hb. 6:5). If according to the teaching of Jewish and early Christian eschatology the resurrection of the dead implies the transition from the one aeon to the other and the beginning of the new and eternal

The 'Last Times', up and running for the last two millennia

During this Easter season some 35 years ago, the ELCA issued its *Guidelines for the Inclusive Use of the English Language*, directing that the feminine pronoun be used with reference to the Church only when this entity is being considered in its capacity as the Bride of Christ. The following year, during an Ethics class at the St Catharines seminary, a youthful student now the institution's head piped up with, 'When is the Church *not* the Bride of Christ?' By the same token, one might ask the rhetorical question, 'When has the Church *not* been living in the last times?' A quick review of what the New Testament has to say on the matter will demonstrate that this has been the case since the first Christian day of Pentecost at the latest. 'When the fullness of time came (ὅτε δὲ ἦλθεν τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου), God sent forth His Son' (Gal 4:4). This prime datum of New Testament thought enables the writer to the Hebrews to contrast the 'itty-bitty' (Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως) revelation of the Old Testament epoch with the complete and unsurpassable Revelation given through our Lord: 'but in these last days (ἐπ' ἐσχάτου τῶν ἡμερῶν τούτων, literally, in the afterward of these days) He has spoken to us through His Son' (Heb 1:2).³ If you and I belong to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, we are part of the community for which almost two millennia ago St Paul expounded the typical relevance of events from the Exodus on the premise that 'these things were written for our warning, upon whom the end of the ages has supervened' (εἰς οὓς τὰ τέλη τῶν αἰώνων

creation, the new aeon has begun already, though as yet concealed from the eyes of men, in and with the resurrection of Christ, inasmuch as this is the beginning of the general resurrection' (207).

³ Paragraphs 65 and 66 of the 1992 Catechism of the Catholic Church, which build on this text and are easily available on the Internet, crisply express the finality of the Revelation of God in Christ and might therefore serve the noble purpose of true ecumenical consensus among believing Christians.

κατήντηκεν, 1 Cor 10:11). The proclamation of the synoptic Jesus is premised on the claim that 'the time stands fulfilled and the kingdom of God has drawn near' (πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρὸς καὶ ἤγγικεν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ, Mk 1:15) in such a way that it will never henceforth be far away. On the day of Pentecost St Peter quotes and at the same time more sharply formulates Joel 2:28 in explanation of the supernatural phenomenon he and his hearers have just witnessed: 'On My menservants and maidservants in these last days I shall pour forth of My Spirit' (καί γε ἐπὶ τοὺς δούλους μου καὶ ἐπὶ τὰς δούλας μου ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις ἐκχεῶ ἀπὸ τοῦ πνεύματός μου, Acts 2:18). Jesus 'I' is pure humility vis-à-vis the Father from Whom He receives all He is and has, but it radiates awesome majesty to us members of His mystical body: 'Before Abraham was, **I AM**' (Jn 8:58) so that 'I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life' (Jn 14:6) in such a way that what Moses delivered by inspiration is superseded by the sixfold 'But *I* say unto you' of the Sermon on the mount (Mt 5:21-48). When someone maintained that 'All theology is Christology', he articulated a principle that we have barely begun to put into practice since every article of faith has yet to be exhaustively expounded in light of prolonged meditation on the Incarnate Word. Because He is fully God in essence equal to the Father, Jesus brings the last days and the last times into the world at the latest in the moment when Mary utters her 'Let it be unto me according to thy word' (Lk 1:38) and the Son of God is conceived in her womb by the Holy Spirit. A generation before the Forerunner and his Lord began their ministries, Zechariah the priest wears a prophet's hat to rejoice in a completed work of God already: 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel for He *hath* visited and performed redemption for His people' (Lk 1:68).

Permit me to double down on the Greek text of Acts 2:18 to make the dogmatic assertion that the last times went public through and in the Church on the first day of Pentecost. If I may borrow a term from post-Vatican II Roman Catholic liturgical life, which has replaced the Sundays after Epiphany and Pentecost with the insipid ‘Sundays in ordinary time’, allow me also to assert that no generation of the *Una sancta* wherever situated in time and space has lived for a single moment in ‘ordinary time’! Towards the end of the first century the Apostle John must, according our view of inspiration, be speaking truth when uttering, ‘Little children, it is the last hour’ (Παιδία, ἐσχάτη ὥρα ἐστίν, 1 Jn 2:18), meaning that we may not discount as hyperbole the statement of Ignatius of Antioch, whose Christology and sacramentology are pristinely Lutheran but who may rub diehard Missourians the wrong way by being both a Catholic bishop and a charismatic, ‘*Eschatoi kairoi*—these are the last times!’ (Ephesians, 11). I knew a pious man in St Catharines whose father and whose pastor were martyred during the Holodomor of the 1930s as they sought clandestinely to keep Christian life going in their Ukrainian village. Whether it be under the circumstances of the German Church Conflict or of the constricted life of the Church under all forms of Communism or of the brutal suppression of the Church under Islam from its first incursions into Syria and Egypt in the seventh century right up to the bloodshed being carried out in Nigeria right now under the averted eyes of the world’s media, the last times are present in full force in the here and now. Who more than Satan himself would delude Christians of any generation into thinking they are living in so-called ‘ordinary time’?

Clear-thinking unbelievers must soberly acknowledge *what* the New Testament claims concerning Christ and His Church and about the last times in

the setting of the interlocking two aeons, but sceptics in general and the learned guild of higher critics in particular retort that the authors in question were simply mistaken. Consider this piece of bombast from Rudolf Bultmann: ‘The mythical eschatology is untenable for the simple reason that the parousia of Christ never took place as the New Testament expected. History did not come to an end, and, as every schoolboy knows, it will continue to run its course.’ The chief antithesis in need of refutation by orthodox twentieth-century eschatological reflection was Albert Schweitzer’s account of the earthly or so-called ‘historical’ Jesus as a Jewish apocalypticist convinced of the imminent end of all things who tried to force the hand of the God of Israel, first, by sending out the Twelve in Matthew 10—‘Truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes’ (vs 23, RSV)—and then, when this prodding proved ineffective, by entering Jerusalem and going for broke: ‘In the knowledge that He is the coming Son of man [Jesus] lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to its close. It refuses to turn, and He throws Himself upon it. Then it does turn, and crushes Him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, He has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man, who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to its purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign.’⁴ Schweitzer’s notion of the expectation of the end of the world within a matter of years, even months, is known as consistent eschatology’, *die konsequente Eschatologie*, and many scholars have understood New Testament prediction of our Lord’s Parousia or return on the clouds in glory as the

⁴ Qtd in John R, Stephenson, *Eschatology*, 19.

announcement of an event that must take place within a generation or two at most. Such was allegedly the expectation of St Paul in the letters that critics allow to have been written by him and so great was the dismay generated by the Lord's not returning as anticipated that the so-called 'delay of the Parousia' is supposed to have brought about a recasting of the transmitted teaching of Jesus and of the Church's whole understanding of sacred history. According to Hans Conzelmann, St Luke presents our Lord as bringing not the end but the middle of time, inaugurating an age of the Church that will run for centuries or even millennia prior to the Parousia. This recasting of sacred history precipitated 'early Catholicism' (*der Frühkatholizismus*), which featured an ordered ministry presiding over the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church that were falsely dated back to the institution of the earthly Jesus Himself. Hermann Sasse was not insensitive to the 'delay of the Parousia', which he described as the greatest disappointment the Church has had to undergo, a downer which he claimed has been superabundantly compensated by the sacramental presence of the Lord in the Sacrament of the Altar.

In recent years I've profited from the work of English New Testament scholar N. T. Wright, with whom I became personally acquainted during a stay in St Andrews in 2019. Wright has helped me understand what is meant by the Kingdom of God that Jesus both announced and inaugurated during His earthly ministry. I got a chapel sermon from his picture of the 'perfect storm' that ensued between the winds of political Jewish messianism from the North and of Roman imperial expansion from the West as Jesus enacted in an unanticipated tornado what all happens as God takes the reins and rules in

person.⁵ As far as I can make out, Wright attributes to the earthly Jesus more of a prophetic than of a divine self-consciousness, but he has performed significant service in the case he has made in print and on television for the historicity of the bodily resurrection of our Lord. The German systematician Wolfhart Pannenberg crept in the direction of orthodoxy with his own erection of a whole theology based on a reasoned argument in support of the bodily Resurrection, a valiant venture which suffers from the fault that believing theology is to be built on the received kerygma rather than on the shaky foundation of one's own ratiocinations. But Pannenberg's core assertion is exegetically demonstrable: intertestamental Judaism expected the End to occur in the bodily resurrection of all the dead, with the corollary that the bodily resurrection of Jesus demonstrates the proleptic occurrence of the End. By a process that may well be faulty, Pannenberg derives from the appearance of the End in the Resurrection the Divinity of Christ and the Trinity/Triunity of God. Yes, the Parousia seems mysteriously delayed, but if it had happened centuries ago you and I and all others of this and subsequent generations would have no hope of entering the Kingdom of God. Perhaps we should think of the old aeon as continuing to totter along on borrowed time while the call to repent still resounds here below. St Paul anticipates both the imminence and the indefinite holding off of the Parousia. In Acts 1 our Lord places the timing of this event in the decision of the Father while in John 21 He can give the impression that His Coming may occur within the lifetime of the Beloved Disciple. The future historicity of the Parousia depends not on futile calculations extrapolated from

⁵ See N. T. Wright, *Simply Jesus*.

mysterious prophecy but on the identity of Jesus as True God and True Man in One Person.

A myriad of individual eschatologies in the corporate setting of the intermediate state

As the Church awaits the end and resolution of all things in the visible, public return of her Lord, a multitude of individual eschatologies have reached, are reaching, and will reach their goal as the mystical body makes its pilgrim journey through space and time. In the Marcan account Jairus' father uses a telling turn of phrase as he tells Jesus that his little girl's life is hanging by a thread: 'My little daughter has it lastly/ὁ θυγάτριόν μου ἐσχάτως ἔχει' (Mk 5:23). As you know, our Lord swiftly reverses her brief experience of the parting of body and soul in temporal death but she in the company of Lazarus and the widow's son of Nain and the rest of fallen mankind goes on to undergo bodily death not as a plunge into the blackness of eternal night but as a transition of conscious existence of which the author to the Hebrews writes, 'It is appointed for man to die once and after death cometh judgement' (Heb 9:27). Actual eschatology includes the intermediate state of both the blessed and the condemned. Significantly, Paul does not invite us to take our pick between the Old Testament image of the bodily resurrection of the dead in 1 Corinthians 15 and the Platonically-compatible description of an afterlife awaiting us following the collapse of this earthly tent in 2 Cor 4 & 5. Both are true and hence not to be played off against each other.

Our Lord manifestly envisioned the time of the Church

While the last times began in force with the earthly existence of our Lord and the coming into being of the New Testament Church and while Christians of

the apostolic age already sensed the temporal proximity of the Parousia, Schweitzer had to shut his ears to a good many sayings of the earthly Jesus in order to construct his model of 'consistent eschatology'. St Luke notes that Schweitzer had some followers among those who accompanied our Lord on His last journey to Jerusalem, emphasizing that He told the parable of the pounds precisely 'because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately' (Lk 19:11). If Jesus did not intend to continue to act and speak through the Church for an indefinite stretch of human history, why did He command the Sacrament of the Altar to be celebrated in His memory? And why in Matthew 24 and the parallel chapters of the other synoptic Gospels did He describe passages of time prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Parousia? Yes, the last times were up and running in full force as Peter spoke in Acts 2 but I am intrigued by St Paul's prediction in 1 Timothy 4:1 that 'some will fall away from the faith ἐν ὑστέροις καιροῖς.' Is this comparative to be understood in the sense of 'down the road', in which case it did not take long for heresy to emerge from the circle of clergy who prayed with Paul on the beach at Miletus? Or is to be understood as a superlative, in which case the last times are relegated to a later chronological period?

Apocayptic in the here and now

Earlier I referred to Albert Schweitzer's portrait of the earthly Jesus as a first-century 'apocalypticist' who expected the end of all things within a matter of months, but a more biblically founded use of this term would focus on someone who discerns what is actually going on in the here and now, uncovering how things stand under the eschatological judgement of God. Since I cannot handle an unremitting diet of heavy-duty volumes of historical and dogmatic theology, I habitually and regularly modify the topics of my reading

to include the fictional contents of English literature. In this context, for the last quarter century I have amassed a whole bookshelf of novels from the *The Children of the Last Days* series by my fellow Canadian Michael D. O'Brien, a man the same age as King Charles who spent decades as an artist before turning his focus to writing. Yes, O'Brien does have a keen sense of the signs of the times that causes him to anticipate the Parousia within a generation or two rather than in hundreds or thousands of years' time. But his novels move in a different atmosphere from Hal Lindsay et hoc genus omne. He articulates demonically orchestrated challenges to the universal kingship of the exalted Christ, picturing Christians clerical and lay in a variety of situations taking up their cross to confess Christ and achieving victory over the world through their faith-cum-faithfulness even where the world discerns only their defeat. When I first read O'Brien's trilogy of novels describing a Canadian family over three or four generations from 1900 to 2000, I thought his timing way ahead of the curve, naively supposing we still had a good generation or two before things would get rough for North American Christians in the public sphere. But the startling cultural, political, and religious developments of the two decades since 9/11 have prompted me to realize that Michael is smarter than I am. Since I have no hotline to the Almighty re the eschatological timetable—publishing a book on Eschatology doesn't mean that one knows diddly-squat about the times and seasons that the Father has left to His own authority—I would modestly suggest but by no means dare to dogmatize the view that Almighty God permitted the moral evil of the destruction of the Two Towers as a springboard for a massive appeal for repentance. But instead of hearing and heeding calls to repentance, North American culture was treated to a session of therapy presided over by Pastor Oprah, and rather than reappropriating

discarded dogmatic substance the mainline Churches of North America accelerated their plunge down the abyss of apostasy that assisted the process of the Supreme Court's destruction of natural marriage, an act of terror that had already been committed in Canada as early as 2005. And if there has been nothing eschatological-cum-apocalyptic going on in the societal, governmental, and ecclesial response to the manufactured covid virus that shut down normal life for an extended period from the spring of 2020, then I should not be allowed to stand up before an audience to speak on Eschatology.

Living even here and now under the universal Kingship of Christ

We Lutherans have no business surrendering the grand motif of the universal kingship of Christ to traditional Roman Catholics and hardline Calvinists. The royal imagery of the Bible is of course suspect in North America, particularly in the United States where 'we the people' cling fiercely to our autonomy bending head and knee to no prince or potentate. But Jesus our Lord is not courteously reelected to three-year terms as president of the holy Christian Church; He is King enthroned by God the Father on Zion His holy hill, acknowledged by faith as rightful King of Israel already by the Magi. The Ascension is Jesus' coronation and enthronement over the whole created universe, meaning that all activities that we picture as occurring under the Left-Hand rule of God happen under the Lord Jesus' rightful sovereignty and with accountability to Him. After death cometh judgement with each departed soul appearing before the judgement seat of Christ. Public life in most of the Western world is mostly conducted today in outraged denial of this truth of the universal kingship of Christ. Just in the last week the Finnish public prosecutor has taken the case of the twice-acquitted Mrs Raisanen and Bishop Pohjola to their country's Supreme Court, and the French Government has

instituted a prosecution of a traditional Roman Catholic priest who calmly articulated the bearing of the Sixth Commandment on same sex relations. Cancel culture will not tolerate any public manifestation of life under the kingship of Christ and if the ruling authorities of the United States do not yet enjoy the unchallenged power of the thinly disguised Canadian and European tyrannies, they will not miss the opportunity to besmirch the holiest day of the Christian year by mocking the Creator in His work described as 'male and female made He them'.

From Constantine's establishment of Christianity in the fourth century onwards, the Church has often succumbed to the temptation to subordinate the Gospel to the political project of the moment, whether it be through German Lutheranism's submission to the princes as chief bishops or through the use of the pulpit to promote capitalism in one epoch, socialism in the next, and right now not only the ideology of 'woke' but possibly also the Make America Great Again movement. Since this is not a political gathering, let us cut to the quick by getting to the heart of what has been happening at great pace since Justin Trudeau came to power in Canada in 2015 and began immediately to implement in what is supposed to be the True North Strong and Free a locally adapted version of the Chinese Social Credit System. The canary in this coal mine was a federal policy introduced in 2017 and later upheld in the courts that the summer jobs program for youths aged 15 to 30 could only be accessed by groups that publicly avowed their support for abortion aka 'reproductive rights'. Once a series of so-called lockdowns were imposed and enforced from the spring of 2020 onwards, and especially when civil rights and not least the right to earn a living were restricted and challenged following the pressure to submit to experimental injections from

the summer of 2021 onwards, totalitarianism went into top gear. Alas, whole generations had by then come to maturity who had no idea what totalitarianism might be, whether in its milder form of Mussolini's Fascism or in its sterner manifestations as Soviet or Chinese Communism or German Nazism, with the result that the overwhelming majority of Canadians were oblivious to anti-Christian totalitarianism when it presented itself under their very noses. In the months following and preceding the Freedom Convoy of February 2022, honorable Canadians lost or were menacingly threatened with loss of their livelihood for conscientiously refusing abortion-tainted experimental injections. Alas, bishops and church leaders refused to support applications for religiously based exemptions from the wrongly named vaccines. In this situation I suddenly grasped that for the first time in my lifetime and surely for the first time on North American soil the prophecy of the denial of livelihood to those unwilling to accept the mark of the beast was being realized. An exegete friend of mine agreed that if these pressures and coercive messages were not a fulfilment of Rev 13, then what would be? At that time I wondered whether we were edging into the final confrontation between Christ and His Church, on the one hand, and the amassed forces of political and ecclesial Antichrist, on the other, or whether the covid-cum-lockdown tyranny was simply a dress rehearsal of the Final Conflict to come. It now appears that the latter scenario was the case, which means that Christ-detesting totalitarianism is now somewhat on pause, reassembling its forces, seeking its next opportunity.

Quite the saddest aspect of the fabricated covid scare was the mass cancellation of public worship shortly before Easter 2020, with the sentries hastening to abandon their posts in many cases even before Governments told

them to. A British journalist writing in a supposedly 'quality' newspaper on the Sunday prior to this conference put it thus with respect to the Church of England, but in such a way that it applies to Canadian Lutheranism with full force: 'At the first sign of wolves, the shepherds ran for cover, abandoning their flocks to their fate'. (Isabel Oakeshott, DT, [Why I have come to deplore the Church of England under its current leadership \(telegraph.co.uk\)](#)). A phrase found on the suspect lips of prominent politicians in those days might help us spell out the bottom line of our contemporary experience of being Church in the Last Times. Do you recall mention of how, under the guidance of the World Economic Forum, the great and the good were going to exploit the opportunities furnished by covid hysteria to implement the so-called 'Great Reset'? A smattering of knowledge will show how just about every incoming regime in human history has boasted how it would mend the system messed up by its predecessors in office by carrying out a 'Great Reset'. Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot, the Ayatollah Khomeini and many, many others have dismally failed to achieve a 'Great Reset' as they promised utopia while delivering dystopia. And small wonder that they should fail in their endeavor, since the Great Reset was promised from Gen 3:15 onwards, accomplished in the Incarnation and Work of Christ and then applied within the realm of the Church as we await its full inauguration and completion on the Last Day. As the White Witch fled before the triumph of Aslan, so Justin Trudeau will not succeed in his attempt to implement the Communist Chinese Social Credit system in Canada, even though he may still cause much damage as he endeavors to do so.

The motif of the biblical Great Reset takes us to the very heart of specifically Lutheran and indeed of all genuinely Christian theology. Those modestly

acquainted with the Lutheran heritage know of Luther's preaching and exposition of the image of the *commercium admirabile*, the *commutatio felicissima*, *der fröhliche Wechsel*, the *Happy Exchange*.⁶ Less well known is the fact that there is nothing specifically Lutheran about this notion, which Luther and his contemporaries picked up from a Christmas Antiphon sung in the office of Vespers as well as from other sources. Christ's swapping places with us so that as He suffers our penalty we enjoy the forgiveness He has procured for us is actually but the tip of a very deep iceberg. Explicit mention of the Sweet Exchange/*katallagee glukooosa* goes back as least as far as chapter 9 of the second-century Epistle to Diognetus.⁷ The subject-matter set forth here was explored in great depth using a different image by Irenaeus of Lyons whose whole theology centres in the *anakephalaioosis*/recapitulation achieved by and in Christ, the ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι τὰ πάντα ἐν τῷ Χριστῷ (restoring/re-heading all things up in Christ) mentioned in Eph 1:10 being the core of an extended meditation on Christ's role as the Second Adam. Our fallen humanity derives from Adam as its point of origin. In order for Christ to be Head of restored mankind, He must be part of our race, which happens through His conception by the Holy Spirit in Mary's virginal womb. We do not benefit from the Great Reset accomplished through His taking our place and perfectly glorifying the Father in His life and death through physical descent from Him but through sacramental incorporation into Him, which gift we enjoy through living under His kingship as we await the final manifestation of the fruits of His work. Technological advances have made possible a degree of

⁶ The Atonement is the most advantageous of all bartering transactions, comparable to a situation where the purchaser of a stunningly gorgeous string of pearls satisfies the trader with the turnover of a dead cat in exchange.

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surveillance and control unimaginable to earlier generations of tyrants. And the specter of world government implemented by partisans of religions and philosophies moved by hatred of the genuine Great Reset achieved and still to be fully implemented by Jesus the enfleshed Word is no longer simply a nightmare scenario imagined by dystopian novelists. We would not need faith if we knew when, where, and how religious and political Antichrist will mount its final challenge to Christ the King and His royal spouse the Church, nor can we rule out the possibility that Divine Providence will yet grant revivals and fresh growth of the Church in various parts of the world that will allow renewed flourishing of the culture of Christendom. In this setting we may and should work intensively where we are placed for the renewal and upbuilding of the Church, thereby putting into practice the sage advice implicit in the apocryphal remark attributed to Luther that, if the end of the world were to happen tomorrow, he would spend today planting a tree.