

New Year's resolutions?



I spent the last three days of the year helping on a retreat for young people in south London. On New Year's Eve we had a discussion session, and I put this question to them: If you knew the world was going to end in exactly one hour, what would you do with the time? I was thinking, of course, about the Mayan non-apocalypse of 21 December 2012, when the world was meant to end but didn't.

I was also remembering a provocative Canadian film from 1998 called *Last Night*. Here, the coming apocalypse is scheduled for midnight. The film doesn't explain what form this will take, so instead of this being a disaster movie it's a psychological study of what people choose to do with their last few hours.

Most people are partying in the streets; a dysfunctional family tries to celebrate a non-dysfunctional Christmas dinner, which of course goes wrong; two lovers form a suicide pact in an attempt to show that their lives will not be taken from them; a young woman who has never known love knocks on the door of a stranger. There is not much faith and not much hope.

What did the young people on retreat choose to do with their last hour? I prodded them a bit, not to give a particular answer, but to think about the question in a particular way. First, to reflect on this in the light of faith: it's not just about the end of this world, but the beginning of another. How does that affect your answer? Second, it's not just your own personal end, it's the knowledge that everyone else is going to meet their own end as well.

There were 200 people in the hall, so I just asked for a few random answers. The first response: 'I'd go

to confession.' The second: 'I'd pray.' Then someone was honest and sweet enough to say: 'Ring my mum!' A young guy at the back - maybe trying to provoke us - said he'd go down to the pub and get smashed. And one person dared to voice their deepest, darkest, unconfessed fantasy: to steal a helicopter and ride into the sunset.

The response I didn't expect was this: 'I'd get baptised.' It was a Catholic retreat, so I wrongly assumed that everyone was Catholic; and it was really powerful to hear a young person who was not yet a Christian say that if they had only one hour left, they would ask someone to baptise them.

Then, when I gave them a week rather than just one hour, the answers were more considered, creative and evangelical: to say sorry to those with whom a relationship had gone wrong; to reach out to the poor and those who have no one; to text everyone on the contact list telling them about the mercy of God; to drive an evangelisation bus around Britain. Only right at the end did someone, who happened to be a religious sister, say that she would stop to ask God what he wanted her to do with this last hour.

What has all this got to do with New Year's resolutions? Here is my advice: think about what you would do, in the light of faith, if you and everyone else only had one hour left. And then resolve to do that soon, or at least in the next year ...

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