

4th Sunday before Advent, 2 November 2025, Year C

Readings: Isaiah 1.10-18; Psalm 32.1-8; 2 Thessalonians 1; Luke 19.1-10

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen. (Psalm 19.14)

Noah, one of my grandsons, visited during the week. During the visit, he came to the study asked me what I was doing. I said I was going to write my sermon for Sunday. He told me in no uncertain terms that I didn't have to write a sermon for Sunday because of the holidays. I said we didn't have Sundays off. His response, "Das ist blöd!" English translation... That sucks!

In today's reading from a joint letter to the Christians in Thessaloniki, Paul, Salvanus, and Timothy point out, observing the faith of the Christians in Macedonia, that their faith "is growing abundantly and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing". It is for these two reasons they are ready to boast of this congregation to others. The community has suffered and has endured, and for this, these three persons can commend their brothers and sisters in the faith to others.

This wholehearted commendation is followed by what God will do to the non-believers, which is anything but pleasant, making me, for one, feel uneasy. This is not how I have come to know God. The biblical view expressed here is not one I share without strong qualifications. One thing we should, however, state: if this is indeed how God acts, then it is as Paul acknowledges God's prerogative. God is free to do what he wills. But this passage does smack a little of an 'eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth' meaning in English 'retaliation in kind, an appropriate way to deal with an offence or crime'. I wonder. Not for nothing does Paul write elsewhere that we now see "as in a glass, darkly" – a dim image in a mirror. "But then face to face."

Once again, Scripture challenges us to have a closer look at ourselves as a community of Christian faith, and if we dare, at ourselves as individuals, as sisters and brothers in the family of God. Have we been growing abundantly in faith? Have we been increasing in our love for

one another? A hard look at ourselves might show us to be coasting. It might show us coming up short. It might show that joy in the faith we once confessed has waned and is waning, and our assurance in God's purposes impaired. We are no longer generous in our judgments, even becoming a little grumpy and perhaps even a little nasty? God forbid!

In 2004, some here will recall I was asked by the then diocesan bishop, Dr Geoffrey Rowell, to take up the office of archdeacon of the Eastern archdeaconry in the Diocese in Europe, which I did with some trepidation, with hindsight rightly so. It is an office that the former chaplain also executed, Jeremy Peake. And what you find is, as you take up this role by attending bishop's staff meetings, engaging with church councils, just how much is sadly amiss in the church. Jesus weeps for Jerusalem, I weep at times for Jerusalem as well, the Church, the mother of us all, as Paul writes in Galatians (Galatians 4:26).

Attending bishop's staff meetings affords a bird's-eye view of all that is amiss in the diocese, in the Church, despite all that is being accomplished in God's name and through God's might working in His people. Being a senior officer in the Church is not for those of little faith. I am partial to the phrase, "Look not on our sins but on the faith of the Church". It is a prayer said during the Catholic Mass, asking Jesus to grant peace and unity to the Church. True peace and unity originate in God. These we cannot give ourselves apart from God. Senior leadership makes you sorely aware of the blemishes, some indeed severe, which are forever threatening to bring the diocese and the wider church into disrepute. What, of course, is true on the macro level is replicated to differing degrees on the micro level. As Paul writes precisely, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God", Jew and Gentile alike.

What follows is for building up and not tearing down. As we look a little closer at home firstly, Christ Church must seek always to be a family-friendly church where people have regard for children, getting to know them and showing degrees of tolerance and understanding that may make some feel inwardly uncomfortable, while parents also have an eye for the older members and their needs. Christ Church should not only be family-friendly, it should affirm families. The motto is simple: We are for families. We are for

families grounded in God's love. We will want to support parents and their children, who through Christ are also by extension our sisters and brothers learning to have regard for one another, as Paul writes. At the baptism service this is made abundantly clear when the officiant asks,

Faith is the gift of God to his people.

In baptism the Lord is adding to our number those whom he is calling.

People of God, will you welcome these children/candidates
and uphold them in their new life in Christ?

All **With the help of God, we will.**

Secondly, we must assure that we remain a welcoming church at all times, as we trust we will be welcomed by God in turn. Thank you to the sidespersons for your faithful ministry! Everyone must make sure people are made to feel welcome and not uncomfortable or even express nastiness, as some have done. Let us not be stumbling blocks to others and by being a stumbling block to others become a stumbling block to ourselves. When we fail to welcome, when we fail to be friendly, when we show a lack of empathy for young families, we fail the Christian faith we profess, we fail ourselves, and importantly God. Some families are struggling, and if we have had children of our own, will know that sometimes it all gets a bit much. Where can we turn to help or for understanding and strength? Well hopefully to Christ Church. Become active and befriend a family that might be or is struggling. Christ Church is not our church, but a branch in God's church.

When I first came to you, I came to a people and not a building. In the early years, I often turned to a prayer I much love by Bishop Tomas Ken, a Bishop of Bath and Wells in the 17th century. It reflects something of the expanse of God's abounding empathy for us and which we should have for others with the line to shut out all envy, pride, and strife.

O God, make the doors of this church wide enough to receive all who need human love and fellowship, narrow enough to shut out all envy, pride, and strife.

Make its threshold smooth enough to be no stumbling block to children, nor to straying feet, but rugged and strong enough to turn back the tempter's power.

O God, make the doors of this house the gateway to your eternal kingdom. Amen.

By returning to where we set off, we remind ourselves of how Paul, Salvinus and Timothy spoke warmly about the church in Thessaloniki in the most complementary of terms.

“We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore, we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.”

Let us commend ourselves to God as we grow in faith, for if we grow in faith, it follows that we will grow in our love for one another.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. **Amen.** (Ephesians 3:20-22)