

## **St Mary's Holy Communion 17<sup>th</sup> November 2019**

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday before Advent – Kingdom Season**

**Malachi 4:1-2a**

**2 Thessalonians 3:6-13**

**Luke 21:5-18**

these few weeks of Kingdom Season that lead up to Advent are both an ending and a beginning, both a culmination of a church year and preparation for a new one; it's a time to reflect on the nature of God's kingdom – how we experience it now, and what we hope and expect it to be like in the future

did you see a programme the other week on ITV called, 'Exposure: Britain's Hidden Hunger'? it concerned the growth and causes of hunger amongst children in the UK; this is estimated at about 20% currently and rising steadily, especially during the holidays, when free school meals are not provided

the programme featured our own Marish Primary School, here in Langley, where I am Chair of Governors; it was impressive to see how the staff engage with this issue; Gill, the Head, said to me afterwards, simply, 'we do what we can do' – and that includes a free daily breakfast club and three weeks of meals and activities during the long summer holidays – all paid for by the school

watching it, I felt proud – and pretty tearful, to be honest! – to be part of such vital kingdom work: feeding the hungry, caring for the poor in our community; the programme also featured the work of Foodbanks around the country, which are under increasing pressure; that's another area that we are involved in and contribute to

then there's been Children in Need, with nearly £48m donated; at the Coffee Shop last Tuesday, Shin Dother spoke of the work of Slough Outreach among the homeless in Slough; in January we will begin our own winter Night Shelter again at Christ the Worker

so, with all the needs, there is plenty of goodwill around, people ready to step up and do something; but there are questions too about a failing system, that leaves such holes for people to fall into; these are questions we should perhaps be asking our parliamentary candidates, as they begin their campaign for the General Election

you'll see in the News Sheet that an Election Hustings is planned for 3<sup>rd</sup> December; this has come out of the letter from our bishops, in response to divisions over Brexit, suggesting that we should 'encourage truthful and honest debate', and not 'be afraid of the political space but step into it with a message of faith, hope and love' – hence the hustings – so why not come along and quiz the candidates, and invite your friends and neighbours, too?

there are bigger questions before us now than just 'leave or remain', questions about the kind of society we're building, and the care we offer to the homeless, the hungry, the sick and the stranger; what should God's kingdom look like among us, and how are we going to bring it about?

in 2 Thessalonians 3, Paul instructs his readers how to live in the light of the coming of Christ and his kingdom; his main concern is those who are 'idle' – though perhaps

a better translation would be ‘disorderly’ – ‘mere busybodies, not doing any work’; perhaps they think there’s no point in working, if Jesus is coming back soon?

Paul points to his own example, that they should imitate: ‘we were not idle when we were with you ... we worked day and night’; so likewise each of them should ‘do their work quietly and earn their own living’

here we see emerging the so-called ‘Protestant work ethic’, the idea that we need to get on and do our bit, to earn our place in the kingdom and society; and we find also this instruction from Paul: ‘anyone unwilling to work should not eat’

sadly this verse has been used to justify a callous, dismissive attitude towards the poor: they are feckless, idle; it’s their own fault; they should pull their socks up, get to work and sort themselves out!

it’s a bit like Jacob Reese-Mogg suggesting that if the residents of Grenfell Tower had just used their common sense, they would have ignored the fire brigade and got out of the building safely ... their suffering becomes their own fault! should that be our attitude?

we must beware of taking any Bible verse out of its context; Paul is addressing here a particular set of individuals in a particular church; we should hesitate over making that into a universal instruction for all times and places

our first response to situations of need should always be one of compassion, recognising Christ himself in those we have the opportunity to serve; this is Jesus’ own teaching in the Parable of the Sheep and Goats in Matthew 25: that our care for those in need is an indicator of our love for him; that has to trump anything Paul might have to say!

turning to the gospel reading, from Luke 21, we’re still in the temple in Jerusalem, where Jesus has been teaching and disputing with the authorities; last week it was with the Sadducees, about the resurrection

people are admiring Herod’s fancy new building, its fine stones and beautiful décor [you can still see the impressive foundations today at the base of the Western Wall]; Jesus answers them by predicting its destruction: this may look like a lasting testament to the presence of God and his kingdom, but it will all come down, ‘not one stone left upon another’

that prediction was fulfilled some 40 years later, when Roman legions besieged, then overthrew Jerusalem, in response to a rebellion by the Jewish people

but what about the rest of Jesus’ prophecies, of wars, earthquakes, signs in heaven, and so on? are these predictions of specific events, or statements about what keeps on happening in the world?

in every age, we can point to things like this; they’re not so much signs of Jesus’ imminent return, but rather a challenge to us to respond; how are we to deal with this kind of thing? for example:

Luke uses the words, 'limoi kai loimoi', an alliterative phrase that means 'famines and plagues', 'hunger and disease'; yes, these two never really go away – as we might say today, 'an increased need for foodbanks, and an overstretched NHS' – hunger and disease, 'limoi kai loimoi' are always with us!

the question is then, how are we to respond? there will be those who claim to have answers: 'many will come in my name', says Jesus, 'and say, "I am he" and "the time is near"'; or, in election season, 'vote for me! I'll solve our problems! don't trust that other lot!'

and Jesus says to us, 'don't be terrified; don't be led astray; don't go after them'; instead trust in God's way and God's kingdom; look to him for guidance and direction

this passage in Luke 21 follows on from Jesus' comment on the Widow's Mite – the poor woman putting 'all she has to live on' into the Temple treasury, in contrast to the rich giving from their abundance; her story will be told and remembered down the ages, while the splendour of the Temple will fall to dust and be forgotten

Jesus says to us, invest in what is truly of lasting value; trouble and persecution may come our way, but we must keep our eyes fixed on what really matters, and do what comes our way for the growth of God's kingdom

how do we feel about this? when I see the dedication of school teachers, the commitment of foodbanks and shelters, the generosity of donors, I do have hope!

'by your endurance', says Jesus, 'you will gain your souls'

Paul writes, 'do not be weary in doing what is right'

Malachi prophesies, 'for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings'

let us hold on to that hope as we pray for and seek God's kingdom, that it may come in his way and in his time