

## Sunday 18 November: Second Sunday before Advent

### Do not weary in doing what is right

**Readings: 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13; Luke 21:5-19**

*Brothers and sisters, do not weary in doing what is right.*

One of the more unexpected consequences for me of being Associate Vicar at this extraordinary time in the life of St Martin-in-the-Fields is that I've developed a remarkable fondness for Paul the Apostle. As an undergraduate I remember my college chaplain giving me a copy of the theologian C.H. Dodd's classic *'The Meaning of Paul for Today'* in an attempt to convince me that there was more to Paul than being an egotistical misogynist but at the time I myself was too arrogant to take it on board. My change of heart about Paul probably really started some years ago, but there's something now about the work I do day-to-day that means his writings – even or perhaps especially his more outrageously self righteous soundings-off - resonate for me in a way I haven't experienced before.

I find that the more I reflect on Paul's writings, the more I'm aware of a distinct empathy for this curious mix of a man – this mix of passion and pedantry; of arrogance and despair; of self-justification and bewilderment; of his absolute certainty in the particular ministry to which he has been called and his deep sense of inadequacy in trying to fulfil that calling; of his obsessive striving for perfection and his profound awareness of the need for God's grace. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians is probably my particular favourite just at the moment seeming to illustrate all these paradoxes to the full, but in all his letters, you find snippets of that inner tension spilling out.

I've been trying to find a way to describe what that tension is about, and this season of the year – sometimes called the Kingdom season – has begun to focus that question for me. I've come to the conclusion that what Paul struggled with and what I struggle with is that when it comes to turning our prayer "your kingdom come" into a reality, I can't work out where I end and where God begins. If that sounds deluded or just plain pompous, there's the story of a gardener who had worked slavishly to turn an overgrown wilderness into a colourful and vibrant display of flowers and shrubs and a mouth-watering collection of plump and juicy vegetables. A religiously-minded friend commented "You and the Lord have done a fantastic job with that garden", to which the gardener replied "Yes, but you should have seen the mess it was in when left to the Lord alone."

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There's some dispute amongst scholars as to whether the second letter to the Thessalonians that we heard this morning was written by Paul, but today's passage sounds to me like classic Paul. There's a self-righteous rant against those whom he sees as 'idle'; those he sees as not pulling their weight or fulfilling their responsibilities to their local Christian community or to the urgent task of building the kingdom. The reasons behind their idleness is unclear. At the time this was written, there was still a common belief that the final coming of Christ was imminent and the end of all things at hand. If that was true, then striving to build the kingdom in the present seemed pointless – better to wait quietly in expectation. A less charitable interpretation suggested by some Biblical commentators is that it's just human nature – in any group of people, there will always be doers and those who are content to let others do the work.

Whatever was going on in that little community in Thessalonica, I've like to believe that behind Paul's pious self-justification lies a passion for God's Kingdom. Faced with this urgent task of proclaiming the Gospel, and of building the Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, how could anyone be passive or idle or irresponsible?

Of course, it's not just Paul or 21<sup>st</sup> century Associate Vicar's who've struggled with this problem of where our work ends and the grace of God begins. In his sermon on the re-opening of this church, at the end of September, Nick quoted the words of John Wesley: "pray as if everything depended on God, and work as if everything depended on you." There's even a hint of that struggle behind the heresy known as Pelagianism – sometimes called the British heresy – that in its most extreme form seems to suggest that even sin itself can be overcome by human effort. And what about the prayer attributed to St Ignatius of Loyola that we should "give and not count the cost, toil and not seek for rest".

A few days ago as part of our Autumn education series, the veteran peace campaigner Bruce Kent spoke in this church. I've heard him speak many times over the past twenty years or more, and always been impressed by the clarity and calm reasonableness of his words. But what struck me on this occasion more than the substance of his talk was the passion and energy of the man. The decision to go ahead on a replacement for Trident nuclear missile system at a cost of £20billion means that it's not been a great year for the peace movement. I was recently asked if I'd contribute something to a publication by Clergy Against Nuclear Arms, reflecting on "where does the Christian peace movement go from here?" and thinking to myself what a tall order it was to find something substantively positive to say. But listening to Bruce Kent speak a few days ago, that phrase from 2 Thessalonians might have been his watchword - *Brothers and sisters, do not weary in doing what is right.*

In the face of warfare, injustice, global inequality, poverty, or climate change, or even the daily challenges each of us faces, it's easy to despair and become idle or passive and say it's beyond us to effect change. It was inspiring to hear someone like Bruce Kent who's faced setbacks aplenty in his work, continuing to speak with a passion for the Kingdom, continuing to believe that change starts with us – continuing to say:

*Brothers and sisters, do not weary in doing what is right.*

But that still leaves me with that unanswered question – where do I end and God begins? What's the reality of trying to live out a calling to build the kingdom with an acknowledgement of our human limitations and our need for God's grace?

In today's Gospel reading, Luke address the words of Jesus to a church facing its own tensions of living the Kingdom in the present and looking to the consummation of all things in the Kingdom to come. As Jesus looked ahead to his own passion, to the cost to the human Jesus of living out the prayer "your Kingdom come, your will be done", he doesn't spare his followers what that cost will mean to them.

*They will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name. and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name.*

But then just as all this strife and striving begins to feel overwhelming and oppressive, Jesus says to them:

*So make up your minds not to prepare your defence in advance; for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.*

“I will give you word and a wisdom” - what that says to me is that I’ve probably got the question wrong; that it’s not really where I end and God begins but it’s about learning again and again and again to trust and believe and expect that the grace of God is there within the tensions and not as an adjunct to them; that the relationship between what I pray for and my daily work is the very ground where the seeds of God’s kingdom lie hidden ready to germinate; that God doesn’t take over when I fail but that the kingdom made manifest in an incarnate, crucified, risen and exalted Christ is apparent both through our human limitations and beyond them.

It might not surprise some of you to know that I have a particular dislike for what’s sometimes called the ‘serenity prayer’ that begins “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change”. I think it’s the Paul or the Pelagius inside me that says anything can change if you try hard enough, so for this Kingdom season, I’m trying to pray my own variation on it:

*God grant me the courage to not grow weary in doing what is right; the humility to let your wisdom speak and the grace to recognise your kingdom as it is and is yet to come.*