

Parish of Esher
Christ Church, Esher with St George's, West End

SERMON

Advent Sunday, 2 December 2018,
9am Sung Communion, St George's, West End
1 Thessalonians 3.9-end; Psalm 25.1-9; Luke 21.25-26

Ven David Gerrard

In the Name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

1 Thessalonians 3.9. How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you.

Today is Advent Sunday and the Church's year begins with the run-up to Christmas as we can see with a new Xmas Tree to be decorated by the children after the service, and having lit the first of the Advent Sunday candles on the festive wreath.

Advent is a penitential season like Lent and traditionally focused on rather grim themes of the season; death, judgement, heaven and hell. However life is grim enough at the moment with wars and murders, international conflicts, Brexit and the like so I want to concentrate this morning on a rather more cheerful subject that of Thanksgiving. Hence the reading from Paul's letter to the Church in Thessalonica.

Paul begins his letter as he often did by expressing his thanks to his friends in the church, always a good idea for preachers rather than hectoring them about their faults and failings.

Ten days ago, as I do every year I sent an email message to our friends in America wishing them a happy Thanksgiving Day - despite their President. Several replied. One wrote, "Our splendid republic has overcome many trials and I am confident will overcome this one too. As the prominent billionaire Warren Buffet wrote, "Always invest in a company which can be

run by an idiot, because one of these days an idiot will run it. Applies to countries as well." And I would add, "And churches!"

Another one described what happens at the Thanksgiving dinner, which is of course in memory of the communal meal the first settlers held after the first harvest in their new land. "We hold hands round the table and one by one tell the other guests things for which we are thankful." Rather a delightful custom I thought.

It is a natural human tendency to dwell on bad news; disappointments, tragedies, large and small, and to ignore the good news, and all the things for which we should give thanks. It is a useful exercise to divide people we know into two categories, those who are contented – and those who are discontented. The former often give thanks for many things, the latter seldom do. And these categories do not reflect their lives, as to whether objectively they have good health, a family, friends, sufficient money, or not.

Despite all the troubles of this country it is consistently found to be one of the best places in the world to live. The world is a beautiful place, and we only have to come out of the doors of this church, Sunday by Sunday and look at the view to realise that we live in a beautiful part of it. And Sunday by Sunday we only have to look around the church to realise how many kind, loving, industrious, amusing, devoted, committed people worship here. A few years ago I was talking to one of our members about young Yasmin Ingram, a hugely contented and joyful young girl despite having to suffer from a brain tumour for all her life and being blind as a result. And the lady said to me, "The people of St. George's, West End have wrapped young Yasmin in a blanket of love. "And so you have. Like St. Paul I constantly thank God for the joy and privilege of worshipping with you and being allowed to play a very small part in your life. And you are not alone. In countless churches, individuals and communities testify to the love of God not only by their words but by their actions as well.

A couple of months ago Jen and I went to a charity event to hear about the work of trying to eradicate malaria in Africa. It is still a frightful disease killing millions every year, mostly children and pregnant women. We heard one harrowing story of a father finding his young son had malaria, and walking to the nearest clinic many miles away carrying his young son in his

arms. His journey was in vain. His young son died a painful death in the clinic, and his father then had to carry his dead son home to his village to be buried. Malaria can be prevented fairly easily with good mosquito nets and other simple measures, but getting the nets the last mile to the homes where they are needed is very difficult. At this charity meeting were several African Bishops because it is the churches, desperately poor churches, which are the best way of ensuring that the donated nets reach the needy families in peril from malaria.

When I was the vicar for ten years of a very poor, and very violent parish, parish at the Elephant and Castle one of the major problems was that there were very few professional graduates available. This was largely because less than 5% of the homes were owner occupied. One private home was occupied by a Baptist couple who instead of living in a pleasant area – like here – had moved from poor area to poor area, assisting different Baptist churches, and using their skills to help the community.

I could tell you hundreds of similar stories. Jesus said, "He who helps the least of my brothers helps me." And we should and we must.

Advent is the season of waiting. The word Advent means coming, and we wait for the coming of Jesus to be born in Bethlehem. Two weeks ago William Allberry preached about the Kingdom of heaven, and as we wait for the coming of God's kingdom when there will be no more war or suffering, we must work as well as wait and pray. I have nothing against prayer, of course not. Prayer is good but we need to do more. In the Nineteenth Century during one of the frequent outbreaks of cholera in London, Charles Kingsley, the nineteenth century Christian socialist vicar and novelist, heard preachers during one of the outbreaks of cholera telling their congregations to pray, and Kingsley said they did not need to be on their knees praying but on their knees clearing out the drains. We need actions as well as prayers.

Above all we need to give thanks to God as we await the coming of the Lord Jesus. We need to thank God for his creation, for his love for us, for his gift of Jesus as our brother and saviour, and also for the gift of his church and for our friends inside and outside the church. As Paul wrote, "May the Lord make us increase our love for one another and strengthen us in holiness". Amen.