

Rector's annual report

23/11/25 – Christ the King – sermon at Communion (annual meeting)

Readings: Jeremiah 23.1–6, Colossians 1.11–20, Luke 23.33–43

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Today marks the end of another year's cycle in the Church year – begun last year on Advent Sunday and now finishing on this Feast of Christ the King. The Scottish Episcopal Church doesn't seem to like it but in England we also called today Stir Up Sunday, reflecting the collect for the day and the traditional time for starting to make Christmas puddings.

We're in what I like to call the distinct season of Pre-Advent. You won't find this pre-Advent season on the liturgical calendar other than we occasionally call these weeks Sundays of the Kingdom or an extended season of remembrance. But something's changed from the previous weeks of Sundays in Pentecost. Gone are the nice stories about Jesus healing the blind man or the moral teachings about the wise use of our resources. The feeding of the 5,000 is a distant memory. The tone has changed. We're even thrown back today to the terrible story of the Crucifixion, which somehow seems out of place yet must speak volumes even now.

We tend to hear difficult messages around now about the end times, about the Second Coming of Christ, about the last judgement, and of course about Christ as universal King. And I realise how important all those readings of the past few weeks are at this period in our Church year. Today comes to us saying, "Advent is all about being prepared, looking to the future, having hope – but if you get too busy for all that in the run-up to Christmas, think about it now as it's just so important!"

It is a welcome jolt to us on a day on which we are holding our annual church meeting. As I have noted in previous years in England annual meetings are usually just after Easter so we can focus on fresh hope, and the Resurrection gifts of Jesus. Here in Scotland we are encouraged to have annual meetings on this final Sunday of the church year on a day when our hearts and minds are called upwards, to think about Christ the King just a week before we go back to the preparation for the second coming with its themes of hope, peace, joy and love.

And if we dare to be challenged by the idea of Stir Up Sunday then we can consider today a call to be stirred up in our church and personal lives. Yes, we must be ready. We mustn't leave it too late to prepare ourselves. This isn't just an Advent theme, it's the pre-Advent theme – in fact it's what we should always be thinking about, not just shoving to a few weeks in the year.

The message for us in this brief season of pre-Advent is that we live in an in-between time. Christ has come into the world, but Christ has yet to return. The full glory of Christ has not yet fully been revealed. But if we open our eyes we see glimpses of this fullness in our own lives. When we gather as a community around this altar, we catch a glimpse of God's kingdom. When we feed the hungry or clothe the naked we catch a glimpse of God's kingdom.

When we see the love of God through one another, we catch a glimpse of God's kingdom. But it's all just a glimpse, not the totality of the Kingdom. That's what we all look forward to. That's what we all anticipate with great hope and joy.

It's a perfect time to hold an annual meeting. We can look around us and give thanks for God being at work in our church and wider community. It's a time of thanksgiving for the congregation's faithfulness and God's sustaining grace over the past year. And it's a time to acknowledge all the challenges and victories, recognising as always that God has been present in every season. We give thanks for every person who has contributed in any way to the life of our church – to our Vestry, to all of our congregation, to our choir and organist – Esther for most of the year but we are soon to enter another era when our new organist and choir director begins next month, to Janet for keeping our magazine relevant and interesting, to those who have helped take services, and especially Revd Kevin Francis, for whom we continue to be grateful for all of his practical and prayerful help and support and cover of services.

An annual report is just a black and white consideration of how things have been but all the words and figures don't properly reflect all the hard work done by so many in so many ways – from cleaning brasses, the church and halls to committee work and many meetings, from assisting with services at the front to helping behind the scenes in so many ways, from setting things up to clearing away, from arranging the flowers to maintaining the garden. There's a real danger in leaving people out if you try to name names, so I'd like to cover it all by thanking everyone for helping us to continue our church journey in faith, hope and commitment in this past year.

We have lost some dear friends in this past year and we have welcomed new faces. We have continued in many aspects and grown in some too. We have changed in some of the things we have done, built on successes and reached out to new possibilities. We have every reason to be encouraged today and to be optimistic as we look ahead.

But as we step into another year we need to be realistic about our hopes and expectations. Hopes of reaching out to others or to young people or to increase numbers are not things that can be done by the clergy alone – in fact in many cases they can't be done by the clergy at all. The congregation needs to be aware of its role in welcoming, supporting, praying and encouraging. It is quite shocking that we find it so difficult to find people to take on even small roles and not least serving on our Vestry. There is no lower or upper age limit on offering talents, gifts and abilities to the church. You are all a part of God's ongoing story in this place – clergy come and go but the constant is the congregation who care about this church and its work – at least I hope you do!

We need to care about and be aware of everyone else. We are more than a 10.30 Sunday morning congregation – there are other services and activities during the week and we must not selfishly think the only things that matter are the ones we attend. It's always a privilege to be able to see people who want prayer, or a short memorial service, or want to discuss faith, or talk about baptism or marriage and so much more and they will not feel that welcome and support if the church or hall is cold because someone has fiddled with the heating, or if moments of peace and prayer are disturbed, or if they come in and find a mess. It's all about looking out for others – in the way Christ did in his ministry and even on the Cross.

In Philippians 1.3-6 Paul writes: “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”

This meeting is a time to look back with gratitude and look forward with hope. The Apostle Paul’s words to the Philippians remind us of two truths: God is faithful, and his people are called to be faithful. As we review the past year, we see God’s hand at work—in answered prayers, in lives transformed, in ministries that have touched hearts.

And as we look ahead, we do so with confidence, because the same God who began a good work in us will bring it to completion. That’s what happens when we pray, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done in earth as in heaven.”

It’s not just nice words to invite you to think of the moments this year when God provided—when he opened doors, healed wounds, and gave strength in weakness. Every testimony is a reminder that we serve a living God who is active in our midst.

As we plan for the year ahead, let us commit to serving side by side, encouraging one another, and bearing each other’s burdens. Our strength is in our unity. Our strength comes from Christ who is crucified and risen and ascended and who pours out his Spirit to enable his work to be done here.

The danger of an annual meeting is that it can look as though the church is all about reports and programmes and budgets whereas it is actually about faith and vision. It is about seeing with spiritual eyes what God wants to do in and through us.

Our summary of this meeting might be ***For all that has been – thanks. For all that will be – Yes!*** Let All Saints be a church that is truly stirred up week by week, stirred to do God’s work, stirred to love and serve and respect each other, stirred to go out from this building and continue to build up and love and support and encourage.

To each and every one of you I say an enormous thank you. And as we stride onwards let us be confident in all we can continue to do in the name of Christ our Lord and King. Don't be a pudding - instead, let the promise of his glory, the person of Christ, the vision of the gospel, and the Spirit of the Lord change your life, stirring up your wills, your minds, and your hearts.

So I urge you to pause on the cusp of this great season of expectation. Listen, watch, and pray. For the kingdom of God is at hand.

Let us pray: Lord, give us wisdom and understanding as we see you at work and grant us joy, love, and thankfulness as we remember the past, follow you in the present, and anticipate our future with you. Amen.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'David', written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

The Revd David Guest
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