

SECOND BEFORE ADVENT C
ST MICHAEL'S, ABINGDON
16 November 2025



Malachi 4.1-2a / 2 Thessalonians 3.6-13 / Luke 21.5-19

‘Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right.’

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

THE FIRST AND THE SECOND LETTERS TO THE THESSALONIANS seem like two sermons from St Paul, each pulling in a different direction — or maybe even two *St Pauls*. In *First Thessalonians* he tells us to *stay on guard*, cos the Day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. In *Second Thessalonians*, he says that day will not come unless a whole sequence of mysterious events comes first, so cool your jets. In *First Thessalonians*, he says to *scold* ‘idlers’, people who are so agitated about the return of our Lord that they quit their jobs and are waiting for Jesus’s return exactly as eagerly as St Paul urged us to; in *Second Thessalonians*, he insists that they should get back to work, and anyone *unwilling* to work should not eat! And ever since St Paul’s time, the church has wobbled between, on one hand, planning ahead for the long run, keeping our heads down and working day by day, and on the other hand focusing on the end of all things, when God will wrap up the sky like a blanket and not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down. The Church Commissioners want to keep a close eye on endowment, interest, and capital, while a great many of us parish clergy want them to set more of their vast resources to work *right now* to help us build up a people who love God and to support local churches and clergy.

Each of these ways of thinking expresses important true things about our

faith in God. End-times theology *rightly* emphasises that we very easily tend to allow ourselves to get caught up in matters of everyday life, as if Jesus hadn't warned us that even our exquisite houses of prayer, our cathedrals and minsters, won't last forever. We are placed among things that are passing away, and yet we *cling* to them — even to the neglect of the things heavenly to which we should hold fast. When we keep our mind on the great last things, the lesser worries of today (delightful as they are) seem relatively insignificant. Even vitally important aspects of our mortal life — just last week we heard the Sadducees' question about to whom we might be married in heaven — even matters as important as sacramental love just don't translate to resurrection life, where we neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels, resurrection people. Jesus assures us that we can let go of our possessions, our dearest loves, trusting that all good things will be given to us as well.

So the end-time ethic of renouncing all material goods, all mortal desires, gets at truths that Jesus and Paul taught; but they also taught that we should act prudently. St Paul reminds the Thessalonians that although the Lord will surely return, we oughtn't imagine that we're on gardening leave until then. Paul himself was a leather-worker, perhaps a tentmaker or a tanner, back-breaking labour, so when he urges the Thessalonians to pull their socks up and get to work so as not to be a burden on their neighbours, he's speaking as somebody who knows the meaning of a hard day's work. And although Jesus usually emphasised leaving material concerns behind and following him on the way of discipleship, he too gives common sense guidance about counting the costs, and not starting projects we can't finish.

Granted then that *both* giving up earthly concerns *and* making prudent plans to put food on the table figure in the church's teaching, we can understand why the church has struggled to find the balance between these alternatives. I don't think we're meant simply to split the difference, as if to be prudent and work hard on weekdays, and to detach from temporal

concerns on weekends and holidays. Rather, we ought always to ratchet back the extent to which we care for material things. Unless there's a surprise visitor this morning — Madge? — I am confident in asserting that none of us here is a material girl, and the world in which we live is *more* than a merely material world. That material world is good, very good even though it's subject to decay, to corruption, to death and destruction; God created the material world and blessed it, through and through, perishing though it be. But even better, God created *life* in the world, life that will endure beyond time, and that life partakes of God's spiritual timelessness. As we live in a world compounded with, amalgamated of, interwoven with complementary material and spiritual aspects, we ought not turn our backs on *either* our physical well-being *or* our spiritual well-being; we should keep our eyes fixed on heaven, watching God, but perhaps keep our ears tuned in to the beats and sighs and shouts and cries of the earth. The earth and *all* creation now are groaning in travail, but by God's grace we, and all creation, will be set free from our bondage to decay and death. We and all creation belong together in a liberation whose name is *hope*, and until we can unaided understand the speech of dogs, cats, caterpillars, oaks and poplars, even fierce volcanos and pebbly strands, until we share understanding with all creation, it's our job to dwell with all our world in hope on their behalf. God calls us to bear in ourselves the hope of the world, and that entails dwelling with the world not as conquering *extractors* of material resources, but as thankful *sharers* in an abundance, a *superabundance*, of which we ourselves are an integral part. Brother Sun, Sister Moon, dusty earth *from* which we are made and *to* which we will return, all elements, all waves, all radiance and at the same time all *holiness*, all *grace*, all *love* and *blessing* converge in us and we *diffuse* in them.

By all means, don't shirk our share of the gospel work that waits, un-done, all around us, living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work; and by all means, *look* for opportunities to work for health and well-being, among our neighbours human and animal, vegetable, and mineral. Likewise, let's

keep our eyes raised upward to the heavens, that we may see the first glimmer of Christ's radiance on the spiritual horizon line when he comes, glorious in this gloomy night, risen with healing in his wings; and let's keep our finger on the pulse of an ailing world. We're *not* weary in doing what is right, let's *renew* our solidarity with one another, with our enemies, with the great rocks and the wee pebbles, with birds, fish, reptiles, and beasts, let's raise our voices in songs of praise, so that by our endurance we all may attain to the life of the world to come.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit —

Amen