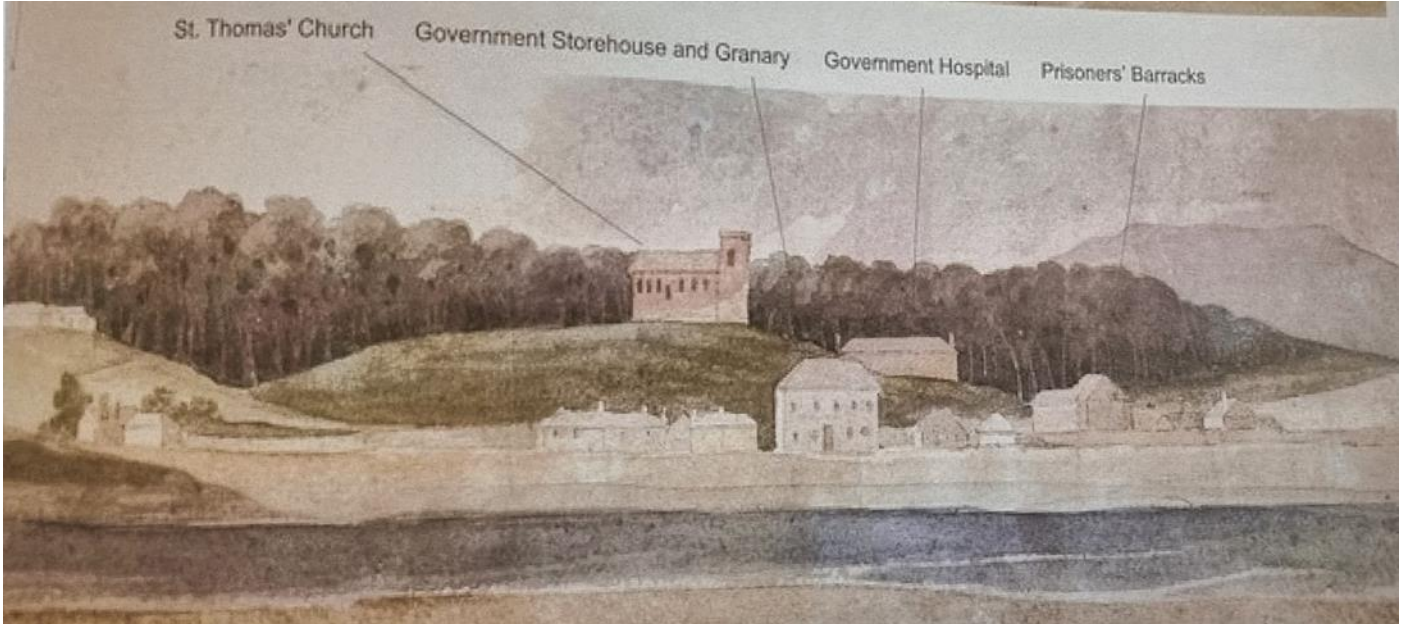


Bicentenary of St Thomas' Church Port Macquarie

1 December 2024 Advent 1

Jeremiah 33:14-16; 1 Thess 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-38

Dr Murray Harvey, Bishop of Grafton



*Early view of St Thomas' Church, Port Macquarie. Augustus Earle 1825 or 1826.
State Library of New South Wales.*

Last night it took me about 2.45 to drive here to Port Macquarie. For my early predecessors it would have taken much longer, and even then they probably would have come by sea or later by train, making my 2.45 journey seem insignificant.

But if the diocese had its own Guinness Book of records I think Bishop Arthur would have taken the prize. He was Bishop of Grafton from X to X. On 22 June 1972 he visited not only Port Macquarie but all 37 parishes in the diocese – all on the one day.

Quote.

If we're talking about records, there have been a number of significant records or anniversaries so far this year.

Coffs Harbour – 125 yrs since the opening of the first St John's Church Coffs Harbour in 1899.

Grafton Cathedral – 140 yrs since the opening of Grafton Cathedral in 1884.

Then to top it all off – St Thomas' Port Macquarie – 200 yrs since the laying of the Foundation Stone.

I bring hearty congratulations from the wider diocese. A Synod Motion from Diocesan Synod this year reads:

That the Anglican Diocesan of Grafton Family offer praise and thanks to God for the 200 years of faithful ministry and service of St Thomas' Anglican Church Community in Port Macquarie. We warmly congratulate them. May

the light and compassion of Christ continue to shine out from St Thomas's Hill into the community and beyond bringing, life, healing, reconciliation, and grace to and among all people.

Our celebration today is in the context of Advent Sunday. Advent has us look back to Christ's first coming, to his birth 2000 years ago, but also forward, to his return, his second coming, to the future consummation of the Kingdom. It's not easy to imagine the end time events that we glimpse in today's readings.

Let's look at today's Gospel. In Luke 21:25-38 we read

Luke 21:25 "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. 26 People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. 27 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in a cloud' with power and great glory.

Here we read that the coming of the end is characterised by cosmic disorder. There will be a day of judgement.

Yet in the face of this prelude to the final fulfilment, the disciples should not be filled with fear, but with hope. This is in contrast to the fear which will characterize everybody else.

Luke 21:29 Then he told them a parable: "Look at the fig tree and all the trees; 30 as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. 31 So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. 32 Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. 33 Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

The fig-tree is the first to show its leaves and indicate that summer is approaching; Like the leaves of the fig tree, the dreadful events prophesied by Jesus are in reality a sign of hope (for the faithful) that the coming of the kingdom is near. So what we see is important, but how we interpret it is important too.

When I was a child of about 4 years of age, I bit the dentist. His name was Dr Wild by the way and he looked a bit wild and scary. He hurt me so I bit him. My mother was embarrassed and soon after we started attending a different dentist. She would retell this story frequently at family gatherings over future decades whenever the topic of dentists or doctors came up. It wasn't until the story came up soon after my mother died that my brothers and sister gave me their perspective on the story, that was quite different to one of shame and embarrassment.

So our perspective is important. Shame and embarrassment, or liberation? Fear and anxiety, or hopeful confidence?

These final verses are saying that it's not just what we see and how we interpret and understand what we see that's important, but how we respond is important too. These events of which our Lord speaks will be intimidating even for believers, but that's no excuse to give up hope.

What do we see, in our minds eye, when we read these passages ?

How do we perceive the revelation of these events? How do we interpret this information?

Do they fill us with fear? Or as people of faith, do we really believe Jesus' assurance that we shouldn't fear? Are we hopeful and confident, despite uncertainty?

Many are distressed or uneasy at Advent when these end-time events and themes dominate our Lectionary readings and our prayers and worship texts. Yet the same event can be perceived very differently by those who witness it. So it's how we approach, interpret and respond that's important. In times of uncertainty, let's hold fast to what endures, relying on the Lord to provide what we truly need.

We might be unclear or even concerned about the second coming of Jesus, but some haven't even accepted his first coming. Have we truly accepted the coming of Christ and committed ourselves to him in our hearts?

A helpful perspective on this theme of the end times is found in Paul's Letter to the Christians at Thessalonica which was our reading this morning.

1Th. 3:11 *Now may our God and Father himself ¹³ ... so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.*

It's clear from this that Paul wants his readers to be blameless and holy to meet the Lord when he comes in judgment. He is not praying that they will *grow and develop so as to be blameless at some future point* when the Lord comes. He prays that God will make their hearts firm in these qualities *now* and that they will continue in this state right until the Lord's coming.

12 And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all.

Our life in community, in love for one another, will be important.

13 And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness

How can we grow in holiness? (topic for a whole other sermon). This can be done through commitment to prayer, study of the scriptures and of course worship

¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.

Paul was writing to them from afar, but hoping to visit in the future. This is about fellowship in the Gospel. It's about being part of something wider than just the gathering of the local Christian community. Being connected, in our case, to the wider diocese, Anglican Communion and church mission.

There are many rich themes in today's scriptures. To be alert to God's Kingdom is a key theme. We are called to be alert *at all times* (Luke 21:36). The word translated as *alert* here is *agrupneo*: a Greek word meaning to watch, or even, to lose sleep. Much of the time as we go about our lives we are so rushed in our daily routine that we are not even aware of how limited our seeing really is; of how we are not always alert to the things of the Kingdom.

How alert are you to what God is trying to do amongst us?

How are our personal and community/parish priorities aligned with the values of the Kingdom?

What might his growing kingdom look like, here and now, in our midst?

Governor Macquarie and those responsible for the construction of this church, and the foundation of St Thomas' as a parish, looked to a future that must have been difficult to imagine. What would their early work result in, in years to come?

Whether it's uncertainty about the future such as the early settlers must have faced, or events we read about in today's Gospel about cosmic disorder signalling the fulfilment of God's rule, we often struggle to decide what is expected of us.

On the one hand, it's clear from the Gospel reading that we are to remain faithful, not to indulge in speculation or to give way to despair (21:34-36). From the fig tree we know that a better, more glorious season is approaching (21:29) so we are to live in hope.

We celebrate the long and faithful history of this parish, yet our future, informed by this past service, should always be focused on a hunger for this Kingdom of God, rather than any kingdom of our own creating. We strive for God's kingdom, fixed always on the values of the kingdom which has no end.

The Vicar of St Martin in the Fields London, Sam Wells, recently wrote a book entitled *A Future that's Bigger than the Past*. In it he writes that God's future is so much bigger and better than any future we might imagine for ourselves in this world. It's big and it's scary sometimes, as the Gospel readings today remind us, but if we stay fixed on the Kingdom and the values of the Kingdom, we have nothing to fear.

I know that you have lots of exciting plans, some of which are already becoming a reality, a mission strategy and the development of a master plan for this site, but whatever you do here needs to point towards, and direct us to, God's kingdom.

Prayer (from The Canterbury Book of New Parish Prayers)

Heavenly Father, at his first coming your Son was born in obscurity, and he calls us now to be awake and watchful for his coming again in glory. Open our eyes, and the eyes of all people, to see his action in the world. Strengthen us in our faith, that we may know his presence with us in our daily lives, and fashion our souls to be places where his coming righteousness will be at home, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Plane used in diocesan visitation

For the first time in the history of Australia, a bishop has travelled completely around his diocese in one day, holding meetings with representatives of every one of his parishes.

The Rt Rev R. G. Arthur, Bishop of Grafton made the trip on Thursday, June 22, commencing at Tweed Heads at first light and landing at Port Macquarie at last light. He landed at 20 airstrips.

The flight took place as part of a Thanksgiving Program which was conducted simultaneously in all 37 parishes of the diocese. The program had a dual purpose. It aimed to improve the financial position of each parish so that the church can get on with its work without spending time and effort in raising money.

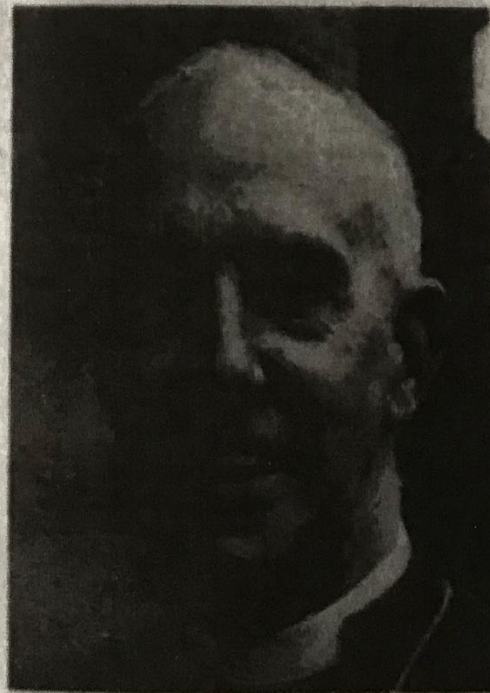
It also involves 2,000 leaders in the parishes in making quarterly calls on 10,000 Anglican families to show Christian care and concern for them.

The focal point of the Thanksgiving Program was Thanksgiving Sunday, in all parishes on June 25.

The pilot of the bishop's plane was Mr David Gowing, a member of the Kempsey Parish. Landings were planned to enable parishioners from every parish to

come to an airstrip to meet the bishop so that he could discuss with them the local organisation of the Thanksgiving Program.

Bishop Arthur was accompanied by Mrs Arthur, and the Director of the Thanksgiving Program, Mr Everal Compton. They landed at Murwillumbah, Kyogle, Woodenbong, Tabulam, Casino, Lismore, Evans Head, Maclean, Copmanhurst, South Grafton, Dorriggo, Coffs Harbour, Raleigh, Macksville, Pee Dee, South West Rocks, Kempsey and Port Macquarie. They then went by car to Wauchope.



Bishop Arthur