

You are all a terrible bunch of Christians! I mean really, really, deeply flawed followers of Jesus Christ; and in the main you have very mixed motives for coming to church this morning and you should repent – repent – of your sins.

I'm sorry for that start to the sermon, but I've always wanted to rain a bit of fire and brimstone from the pulpit and this morning's readings gave me the perfect opportunity to do so. It was worth it to see the looks on your faces.

Of course, you're all deeply flawed Christians; I know this partly because I am myself a deeply flawed Christian and a deeply flawed priest and, like you, I need to repent of my sins, on a regular basis. That's why we call our sins to mind and pray together for God to forgive us them every Sunday in the first part of the Eucharist.

I know how flawed we all are for another reason, too. Over the course of my life, I've been privileged to get to know well a few people who had a deserved reputation for being saints; and the better I got to know them, the more I saw that they all had real character flaws and could, just every once in a while, be quite horrid or quite hopeless.

I wanted to put that prelude into your minds before we turned to today's Gospel reading, which is both hysterically funny, toe-curlingly awful, and very true-to-life. When I play this scene out in my mind as if it were in a film, the bossy mother is always played by Maureen Lipman. What makes the encounter even more cringe-making is that this episode happened very late in Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem, immediately after he told the twelve apostles that he was soon about to be handed over to death.

We don't know what happened to the mother of the sons of Zebedee, but we can imagine that she must have ended up being even more proud of her sons than she clearly already was. One, St James the Great, whose feast we commemorate today, became one of the mainstays of the Church in Jerusalem over the following decade. As recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, he was executed by Herod Agrippa, probably in the year 44, in the same persecution where St Peter was imprisoned. His brother, St John, was of course the disciple whom Jesus loved.

Jesus loved this power-hungry egoist who hadn't the slightest clue what Jesus' Kingdom was all about, with his overambitious psycho mother, so much that he reclined next to Him just a week or two later at his Last Supper and shared with him what He knew were His last moments of joy and human company on earth. Remember that, the next time you find yourself imagining that you aren't good enough for God. The people God loved when He walked this earth as one of us in the person of Jesus Christ were flawed people, who usually misunderstood Him, often made unreasonable demands of Him and sometimes let Him down badly. God loved them as He loves you, not because of anything you do or achieve, but because God is love.

The Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen wrote a famous lyric: "There is a crack, a crack in everything/ That's how the light gets in." Cohen was a Sabbath-observant Jew who flirted with Buddhism and was fascinated by Christianity. I am quite sure he knew he was paraphrasing St Paul's line from this morning's remarkable Epistle reading from the Second Letter to the Corinthians: "we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us."

As well as being love, God is also almighty, and if He wanted to make human beings to be perfect, he would have made us perfect. He didn't, and we need to love and accept ourselves, and one another, and the whole human race, with all the God-ordained flaws that we have. That isn't an argument for just indulging the worst aspects of our character, but it is an argument for self-acceptance and acceptance that we are good enough for God, not least because it is in God-surrounded self-acceptance that we find the spiritual rest in which emotional and spiritual healing and growth can best flourish. It is only in loving self-acceptance that we find the peace to let go and let God; to let God lead us to greater things than we could have wished for ourselves.

Trusting ourselves to God's grace should increase our gratitude; that's another message of our reading from St Paul this morning. Making a habit of being thankful for the gifts God has given us has the most extraordinary capacity to shift our perceptions of our situation and make us much happier with life. It is also something most of us start out life with an instinctive grasp of.

The week before last I spent a bit of time with the children at Bishops Cannings Primary School organising, among other things, a space where they could write or draw their prayers. I told them they could pray for people or things they worried about, or things they wanted for themselves, or they could give thanks to God for good things in their lives. The majority of them opted to give thanks for things, most often for people they loved.

Over the last sixteen months, the thing that I have missed most has been the absence of people I love. I've found the lockdowns to be an awful trial, but one thing they have taught me is to never again take for granted the gift of meeting friends for a chat and a coffee. They also taught me to take stock.

Nearly fifty of us met together in a series of small groups in late May and early June, to take stock as a parish and think about what we've learned during the lockdowns. A copy of the report of those groups was left on your pew this morning. Do have a read of it, whether or not you took part– it's only a few pages. Don't hesitate to get in touch with me or one of the wardens if there's anything in it you want to disagree with, or any idea in it you'd like to take forward.

One thing that came through very strongly in it was the idea that we wanted to be a stronger community, and another was how much people appreciated how the groups gave them the chance to get to know people from church they hadn't known before. So let me make one suggestion as we rebuild our community after the lockdowns – over the next few weeks, before or after the service, introduce yourself to someone whose face is familiar but who you don't really know, especially if they're mostly involved in different aspects of the church's life to you. Perhaps that might be a step towards learning to love ourselves as a church community, flawed though we might be. Perhaps we might help one another to see the treasure that lies within the clay jar that is each one of us.

Now to the only wise God our saviour, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.=