

**Sermon on Sunday 26 January, 8.00am Service**  
**by Rev. Bill Church**  
**Third Sunday of Epiphany**

*Reading: Romans 12. 16-21*

*"Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord."*

This is one of Paul's often-quoted sayings.

It is presented as a biblical quotation but, perhaps because Paul is quoting from memory, it is constructed from Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

Jesus makes much the same point in the Sermon on the Mount.

Paul could not have read it (because he was writing before the Gospels had been written), but maybe he had heard it.

Whatever its source, it is very true and relevant to today.

Liverpool Crown Court heard details of an unutterably awful crime and the perpetrator was sentenced to at least 52 years in prison. But some have argued he should have been punished even more.

The state of Israel suffered a terrible and calculated atrocity by Hamas, but has its even more terrible assault on guilty and innocent alike made it safer or more virtuous?

The Bishop of Washington urged President Trump to be merciful to people in groups which he considers a threat. The President's reaction was less than gracious.

My conclusion is that there is little appetite to hear this message.

Paul goes on to quote Proverbs and urge his readers not just to forgo vengeance but to nurture their enemies: *"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him drink; for by so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head."*

What exactly is he saying? What are coals of fire?

Paul quotes a verse and a half. The second half of the second verse is: *"And the Lord will reward you."*

Some people think that the author of Proverbs knew about an Egyptian ritual where a penitent placed on his head a vessel with live coals in it, so that the meaning is that kindness to enemies will lead to repentance and reconciliation.

The compilers of the Lectionary seem to think so, too, because they set as an OT reading (which our service does not use) a passage from 2 Kings in which Elisha, by some mystical power, lures an invading Syrian force into a trap in Samaria.

The King of Israel wants to kill them, but Elisha says no. Instead they give them a splendid feast, whereupon they leave and never trouble Israel again.

Other interpretations of "coals of fire" are available.

But we know what Paul thought because he ends by writing: *"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*