

“Be joyful always; pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances... Do not quench the Spirit.”

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we enter the third week of Advent. The weeks of Advent are a time of waiting and preparation. They represent the many years from Adam to Christ in which the world awaited its Redeemer; it also represents the years we continue to wait for his second coming. For this reason, many Christians use Advent as a time of fasting.

If you recall, the first week we focussed upon HOPE and especially the hope given through prophecy: we thought about the Prophets, such as Isaiah, and how they foretold the coming of the Messiah in Jesus. The second week, we focused upon FAITH and especially that of Mary and Joseph as they journeyed to Bethlehem. This week, the third Sunday of Advent, we focus on JOY and especially the joy that the world experienced through the birth of Jesus Christ. Pink is the official colour of this Sunday rather than the purple of the other weeks in Advent. It is sometimes called Gaudete Sunday taken from the Latin for REJOICE. Traditionally, if you are fasting for Advent then Gaudete Sunday is to be a break from your fast. On this third Sunday of Advent, we see a significant mood change.

Next week, on the fourth Sunday of Advent, we focus upon PEACE and mark the final week of prayer and penitence as we await the arrival of our Saviour. We are reminded of the message of the Angels, “peace on Earth, goodwill toward men”.

On Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, we will finally embrace the Christ child – God with us. If we have an advent wreath, then we will light the white candle in the centre – white for purity and sinlessness. But we

have a little way to go in the preparations of our hearts and minds before we get there.

“Be joyful always; pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Jesus Christ. Do not quench the Spirit...” (1 Thess. 5:16-18).

These are, of course, the words of St Paul to the church in Thessalonica, taken from our first reading this morning. Paul writes to the Church in Thessalonica following his earlier visit to the city. We cannot say with certainty how long Paul and his companions were there, preaching and building up the church, but it was certainly a short period, possibly just a month. What we do know was that their preaching was strikingly successful – converting a ‘few’ Jews and a ‘large number’ of ‘God fearing’ Greeks. These people were disillusioned with the prevailing culture of moral laxity and confused religious and philosophical thought. This is alluded to in Paul’s statement earlier in the letter (1 Thess. 1:9).

The book of Acts tells us that upon noting the success of Paul’s mission, some local Jews gathered together some ‘bad characters’ who started a riot (Acts 17:5). They then went to the household where Paul and his companions were staying, and upon finding them gone, dragged members of the household before the local authorities and accused them of harbouring men ‘who had caused trouble all over the world’ (Acts 17:6) and proclaiming Jesus to be King – an inflammatory accusation in a free city because the harbouring of such treason against the Emperor could lead to the city losing all its privileges.

At the time of writing to the Thessalonian Church, sometime later, Paul has been on some journey. After Thessalonica, Paul and his

companions went on to Berea and there found a very willing audience. The local Jewish population was far more open minded to their message and many Jews came to believe. However, the Jews from Thessalonica heard what was happening and followed him there, stirring up more trouble as they went. Paul left for Athens, but left Silas and Timothy behind.

Paul found a rather hostile audience in Athens. The cultured Greeks found the resurrection of Jesus a stumbling block. Nonetheless, Paul's preaching still produced some converts. Timothy joined Paul in Athens, but Paul sent him back to Thessalonica to strengthen the believers there.

Corinth was Paul's next port of call. When he arrived there he seems to have been a discouraged man. Fanatical opponents had brought about his forced ejection from three previous places. This happened in each place just as his work seemed on the verge of great success. He records in his own words that he arrived in Corinth "in weakness and fear, and with much trembling" (1 Cor. 2:3). But a short while later, Silas and Timothy joined him and reported that there were many converts throughout Macedonia (Acts 18:3). Despite all the difficulties, new believers were standing firm and increasing. He was surely encouraged by this and realised afresh that God was with him. And so, we see Paul writing to the church in Thessalonica expressing his concern for them and his joy in them.

The church there seemed to have become overly concerned with issues that were distracting and disruptive. In trying to deal with the problem, it seems likely that the leadership there had become a little frustrated and lost some of their patience and tact. This seems to have led to some problems in personal relationships.

Such issues confront some of the best church leaders, even today. When I was in Geddington, I became very friendly with a local Bishop Emeritus. Now retired and doing what he loved best, he regularly joined us in worship and presided at our Eucharist. He would often relay how, when he was a parish priest in Yorkshire, he had a number of particularly difficult parishioners who, no matter what he did, never gave him a moment's peace – criticising every decision, every sermon. In the end he left and moved on to bigger things. He used to say; "you'll never guess what the cheeky blighters did when I retired. Well, they were in vacancy by then and struggling to find a new incumbent, those same parishioners wrote to me asking me to return and commenting on how fruitful my ministry there had been. You can guess my reply!"

This is not an unfamiliar story amongst clergy, battling away against much opposition whilst in a place, only to be held in higher regard after they leave. When I hear of these kinds of stories, I often think about Paul's experiences throughout the Middle east and Europe.

Anyhow, in verse 13 of the 5th Chapter, just a few verses before the extract we heard today, Paul, writing to the church at large, addresses some of this and tells them that they must hold their leaders in high esteem "because of their work" (1 Thess. 5:13).

After Paul encourages the Church in Thessalonica to support its leadership, he moves to offer words of encouragement. And what encouragement they are! These must be some of the most emboldening words to be found in his letters. And maybe this is why the church gives them to us to hear on this 3rd Sunday of Advent – this Sunday of JOY! He says; "Be joyful always; pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Jesus Christ. Do not quench the Spirit..." (1 Thess. 5:16-18).

It is that same joy we hear in John the Baptist pointing to Jesus too - our Gospel reading this morning. A joy to be found in the person of Jesus of whom John feels he is not worthy to “untie the thong of his sandal”. And this little statement contains some of the greatest wisdom of the whole Gospel. You see, John is not ministering for his own advancement or to enhance his reputation. His not wishing to be a first century celebrity. John’s ministry challenges many, just like Paul’s. And Just like Paul’s it points to something greater than himself. And it is there where JOY is to be found.

The same is true for us. If our motives are self-serving. If our endeavours are somewhere deep-down designed for our own advancement or popularity, then our joy will remain incomplete. But when we can get to that place where all we do in the service of others points to Jesus – God with us – the miracle of the Holy Nativity, then, then, our JOY will be complete.

So “Be joyful always; pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances... Do not quench the Spirit.” Amen!

R.T. Parker-McGee 2020