

17 December 2023
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
Third Sunday of Advent
Pastor Fraser Pearce

At Paul's letters

- As they begin:
- Telling us what God has done for us in Christ Jesus
- As they unfold:
- Giving us the shape of Christian life –
- Of what it looks like to live by faith

Today we are hearing commands from St Paul.

- As modern western people
- Who also read the Bible on our own
- We can get the idea that the commands are for each one of us
- That they are *primarily* personal commands.
- Indeed, they are for each one of us to take personally.
- But it's good for us to remember
- That the commands are addressed *to the congregation*
- To Christian people: to us in our life together.
- So, as we receive God's commands today
- Let's think about how God fulfills them in us *as a congregation*
- And let's get a picture of that shape of common life
- That God is creating here at Bethlehem.

There's the first command: **Rejoice always,**

- What could this mean *as a congregation*?
- Well, what does rejoicing look like generally?
- At a sports game? On election night?
- There is a communal aspect: gathering together
- There is a focus on the victory
- There is singing or something like it.

- We rejoice as we meet together
- As we hear of the victory of Christ
- As we praise his name in song
- God gives us a joyful way of life together.

The next command: **pray without ceasing,**

- This can sound impossible:
- How can we pray while cooking a meal? Doing a tax return?
- There are things to be said here
- But for today: What does it *mean as a congregation?*
- It means meeting regularly, and not giving up;
- It means praying when we meet:
- So, we have regular times of prayer
- Even saying grace together before meals keeps prayer constant.
- It can also mean things like keeping God in mind
- As we speak together: like at a church meeting.
- God gives us a prayerful way of life together.

And the last of the first three commands: **give thanks in all circumstances;**

- This can sound almost laughable -
- There is so much real suffering in life -
- Until we remember that St Paul suffered much
- And knew the wisdom of what he was writing.
- How do we give thanks as a congregation?
- Think of the Lord's Supper: at its heart is thanksgiving
- And think of the gifts we receive through this.
- No doubt we come together with real cares and pains
- But our thanksgiving is in the great deeds of God in Christ
- So that we can rest our sorrows in God's goodness.
- God gives us a thankful way of life together.

Listen to how St Paul sums these three commandments up:

- **for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.**
- As a church we can wonder what God's will is for us
- Especially when there are controversies
- We can together be sure that as we rejoice
- As we pray, as we give thanks
- God's will is being done among us.

St Paul then gives this teaching: **Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.**

- One way to understand prophecy:
- Any word that comes to us presented not as human opinion,
- But as the will or word of God.
- Now, St Paul starts by warning against quenching the Spirit
- And despising the words of the prophets.
- *Why start this way?*
- Well, think about how easily prophetic speaking can be abused:
- Someone wants a change in the church:
- Even something as trivial as
- What colour the toilets should be painted
- And they present their wish as the leading of the Spirit
- And claim those who are against it are against God:
- When we hear this sort of talk
- We can be tempted to tune out completely
- And disregard *any* word that comes to us in God's name.
- St Paul warns us that if we tune out in this way
- We could miss out on gifts that God wishes to give us.
- Rather, he says that it is good for us to pause,
- To think deeply about prophetic words
- And to test claims about God's will:
- Does what is said in a prophetic way promote what is caring,
- What is pure, what is just?
- Does it promote freedom and unity?

- These are questions that we consider together:
- We are free to hold on to what is good, and to reject what is evil:
- God is giving us this wise way of life together.

St Paul then pronounces a blessing: **May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

- It is God alone who makes us holy, and he does it *wholly*:
- Not just our spirit, or soul, *but also our body*
- These are set apart by God for service in the church
- And to our neighbour in the world:
- God's blessing is practical, bodily, in its consequences:
- It frees us to us engage in this world,
- And prepares us for the advent of our Lord in glory.

St Paul adds these final words:

- **The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.**
- Our hope is in God: he is the one who has called us
- Into the life of faith: He is faithful
- We can trust that he will complete what he has started.
- To God be glory in Jesus' name. Amen!