

13/12/2020

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Third Sunday in Advent

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A thought experiment:

How different do the following words sound if we hear them

As individuals, thinking about our own lives

Or together, as a congregation?

**Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.**

When we think about this as individuals, questions come up.

For example: *How do we pray without ceasing?*

What about making dinner, watching a movie, doing my job?

The same sort of thing with rejoicing and giving thanks...

But what if we hear these words addressed to us *as a congregation?*

How do we *together* rejoice always?

How do we *together* pray without ceasing together?

How do we *together* give thanks in all circumstances?

Then it seems to me a rather different picture emerges

Now, as it happens, every time the word 'you' is used in this reading

It is in the plural: the Greek word is a plural one: *you all*

Likewise the commands 'rejoice', 'pray', and 'give thanks'

Are addressed in the plural: 'you all rejoice', 'you all pray', 'you all give thanks'

And so God has a will for us not only as individuals, but as a congregation.

On the one hand there is of course a place for thinking about

How we keep these commands *as individuals*.

But today let's think about how we do these things together

And especially how God frees us to do these things as a congregation

Here at Bethlehem

First of all, let's think about the liturgy

I would say that these three words 'rejoice', 'pray' and 'give thanks'

Are what happens every time we gather together at worship

For a start, *we together rejoice*

Not necessarily in the particular circumstances of our own lives

But in what God has done for us in Christ Jesus

Maybe we come with health concerns, financial strain, or relationship worries

Maybe we look at the circumstances of our lives and our emotional state  
And conclude that *lament* is the appropriate response  
But when we gather together, we take our eyes off ourselves  
Off even of the particular circumstances of our lives  
And we put them on to the victory that Christ has won for us  
As we together sing songs of praise  
And as we confess our faith in what God has done for us.  
We rejoice in this way always, Sunday by Sunday, no matter the circumstances  
Even if Covid makes it difficult to meet at this place  
Then the word goes out through the internet, or television  
Or home worship packages: we rejoice always

Likewise when we meet together we pray together  
We do not cease to do this  
Have you ever been at a church service here at Bethlehem  
Where this did not happen?  
I've been going to church almost every Sunday for my whole life  
And I cannot remember one occasion where we did not pray.  
As a congregation of people brought together in Christy Jesus  
We pray by the Holy Spirit to the Father  
We do this no matter the circumstances of our lives  
This is God's will for us

And likewise with giving thanks  
Sunday by Sunday we give thanks to God  
Especially as, at least at one of our services, we celebrate the Lord's Supper  
What is traditionally called the Eucharist – the Greek term for thanksgiving  
You know how we begin this prayer: ***'The Lord be with you. And also with you.  
Lift up your hearts. We lift them up to the Lord. Lets us give thanks to the  
Lord. For that is fitting and right. It is indeed fitting and right, and for our  
lasting good, that we should at all times and places give thanks to you, Lord  
God...'***

And so, Sunday by Sunday, indeed, as a wider church,  
at all times and in all places we give thanks to God  
And this is God's will for our lives

Note again, by the way, that St Paul says **'for this is the will of God in Christ  
Jesus for you.'**

When we ask the question, What is God's will for my life?

We know that one answer from God's word is that we  
**Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.**  
And we know that we do this especially together, as a congregation.

The next words that we hear from God's word  
Are also directed to us together. Listen to what St Paul says:  
**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.**

Now the text does not specify  
what the *words of the prophets* are in this context.  
One way I'll think about it today: any word that comes to us  
Purporting to be the word of the Lord, that is, God's will for us.

I'll use one *exploratory* example today that is controversial in our wider church  
And that is the issue of the ordination of women as well as men  
To the public office of the ministry.

In our public teaching we quote passages from Scripture  
That, in the evaluation of our church,  
Prohibit a woman from being called into the public office of the ministry,  
And we say that this apostolic rule is binding on all Christendom.

We know that there are also many people in our church  
Including pastors and bishops  
Who quote other passages from Scripture  
And say that it *is* God's will that women be included in the pastorate.  
Well, what are we to do?

It seems to me St Paul's words are apt here  
And in fact describe what we do, even if imperfectly, as a church  
Again, St Paul writes, **Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.**

We don't simply refuse to listen to those whose claims we may not want to hear  
But we do test, and testing is a group effort:

We think as individuals, and our own life story and circumstances as individuals  
shape the way we receive and hand on God's word to us.

And then we work *together* as we test different claims and counter claims  
Holding fast to what is good, *no matter who says it*  
And abstaining from evil.

St Paul doesn't say that this process is quick and easy  
But he does say that even in such difficulties God's will for us

Is to **rejoice always, pray without ceasing, [and] give thanks in all circumstances**

Even in the fatiguing, drawn out process of testing the words of the prophets.

We can rejoice, and pray, and give thanks

Because the ultimate victory over death and sin and hell

Has been won for us in Christ Jesus

And our confidence is not in what we can achieve

But in what God has done for us by his grace, his favour

St Paul draws this passage to a close, not by telling us to do anything

But by pronouncing a blessing

And by encouraging us. He says:

**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. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.**

Just a fun fact, if anything involving Latin could be called fun

The traditional Latin Bible has for the words

**at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ**

***In adventu Domini nostri Iesu Christi***

In adventu, in the advent, the arrival in glory,

the coming to bring true justice of our Lord Jesus Christ

It is God who has called us into the life of faith in Christ.

He calls us as individuals, he calls us by name

And knows the number of the hairs on our head.

But he calls us *together*, into the flock that has Jesus himself as Shepherd

The one who calls us is faithful

He will make us holy and keep us wholly sound and blameless

At the advent of Christ

So we are indeed free to **rejoice always, pray without ceasing, [and] give thanks in all circumstances**

And so to experience the will of God in Christ Jesus fulfilled in us

As we await the advent of our Lord.

May God keep us in this life together. For Jesus' sake. Amen.