

3rd Sunday of Advent 2023. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-28 – Joy through holiness.

I think as we watch and wait this Advent, we do so in three distinct ways. The coming of God in human form as a little baby in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago (the incarnation), the coming of Christ into our hearts, and thirdly we watch and we wait for his coming again, the day when everything we know and think we know will change.

This third Sunday traditionally focusses on joy and to do so today, we are looking at our second reading from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, probably the earliest document in the New Testament, c.48AD.

This is the final Passage of Paul's letter and is full of advice on how to live as we await the second coming of our Lord – a way of living that springs out of joy. The joy of believing which stems from holiness. Being set apart for God.

This passage connects being made completely holy with the second coming of Jesus. Paul writes in today's reading, "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." (1 Thess 5:23).

There is a partnership between God and believers in the growth of holiness in expectation of the return of Christ. Paul is certain that God will do God's part, for God is faithful. In today's passage he is urging his beloved little church in Thessalonica how to go about doing their part.

Earlier, Paul has described what the return will look like in chap.4. This will be a terrible day in history, but every aspect of the life of believers, either asleep in Christ or still alive, will be protected.

His intention is to emphasize that at the final day, every part of our lives will be pure because God will make it so. Paul writes, "the one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it." (5:24).

Now, the fact that believers will appear blameless at that event reminds us of what we have heard in previous passages during Advent, that the second coming is also judgement day. Paul is assuring us that we will be on the right side of God's judgment when Christ returns.

At the outset of the letter, Paul speaks of "the wrath to come" (1:10). In our passage, which is at the end of the letter, Paul speaks words of assurance – we will be delivered from that wrath because there will be nothing in our spirits or our souls or our bodies that will attract it. I hope I've explained that ok.

The fundamental reason we escape the judgment is that God will make it so. At the beginning of the letter, Paul speaks of the Thessalonians believers as “beloved by God” and “chosen” (1:4). Just as we are.

He closes the letter by declaring that their beloved-ness, their chosen-ness, will never end. They have nothing to fear. God, who loves them and has chosen them, is faithful.

At the same time, Paul is also urging us to participate in our own holiness. While God will “sanctify you wholly” (5:23), at the same time we are to do certain things in order to grow toward that holiness.

There is a partnership between God and those ‘in Christ.’ God’s part of the bargain is God is faithful and will complete the job of making believers completely holy – the word he uses is *sanctified*. It is Jesus who sanctified us once and for all at the cross.

Our task is to direct our energies towards the holiness God offers and makes possible. This includes always rejoicing, praying constantly, giving thanks in all things, not extinguishing the spirit, not despising prophesy, holding fast to what is good and abstaining from every form of evil.

Some of these directions are unsurprising, given that the purpose of this set of commands is to clarify how believers act when “opened up” by God through this process of being made holy.

The command to “hold fast to the good” and “keep away from every form of evil”, obviously directly relate to being holy.

Other directives are less obviously related to holiness, for instance rejoicing always, continual prayer, and giving thanks in all circumstances. This probably requires a short word of explanation.

Paul is *not* saying that when we suffer grief we are to smile and feel happy. He is *not* saying we should be cheerful when we are hurt by those we love, but rather be conscious that in this trial God’s grace is with us. Joy is deeper than happiness and does not spring from the same well, but is a result of being conscious of the amazing grace of our Lord Jesus.

Now, often it is not humanly possible to rejoice always, so what are we to do? We are to “pray without ceasing and give thanks in all things.” When we pray, we lay our burdens on God through the person of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This lifts us up because we are spiritually “lighter” without our anxious burdens.

When we give thanks, we are bringing to mind all the benefits that God has given us in Jesus. If we meditate on what Jesus has given us for even a few minutes the bitterness of our sorrow can be taken away, and our pain can even give rise to actual and true joy.

We come to learn that God embraces us so tenderly in Jesus that by his grace he turns to our advantage and welfare everything, truly everything, that troubles us.

Paul thinks of joy as a characteristic of Christ. At the opening of this letter, Paul speaks of 'imitating' the Lord, and receiving the word "in much affliction, with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit" (1:6).

Since joy is part of the character of Christ, Paul regularly speaks of working alongside the churches he wrote to for the goal of their joy (e.g., 2 Corinthians 1:24; Philippians 1:25). Rejoicing is a means of becoming like Christ, the one who is without sin.

Paul thinks that trust in God should be the fundamental stance of human beings. It is the mode of life exemplified by Christ and how those who are 'in Christ' are to live. Out of belief comes trust. In his letter to the Romans (1:18-25), Paul claims that the source of wickedness is lack of trust in God.

Indications of trust in God, such as rejoicing always, praying constantly, and giving thanks in all circumstances, are a means to holiness. Trust in God is critical and essential in order to be opened up to the holiness that God imparts to us.

Why does Paul end his letter with this flurry of commands? (Seventeen of them!). Because it is his prayer that the Lord will sanctify us completely and that our whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless at the Lord's coming.

We need to be ready for his coming. These words from God are the means by which God is preparing us to be holy and blameless at his coming.

God is cleaning us up if we will let him do the work. Encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, and be patient with them all. Do good in the face of evil. Rejoice always, pray always, and give thanks always. Do not despise God's word. Know it and cling to it, testing everything that claims to be from God.

If we will do these things, we will be found blameless when he returns. Let us live our lives then in the light of eternity, full of joy, for out of holy joy springs all things. This is the good news of Jesus Christ. The one who calls us is faithful, and he will do it. Let me pray ...