

Molescroft & Minster – Advent 3 Year B

Readings: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-end 1 Thess 5:16-24
 John 1:6-8, 19-28

Theme: Rejoicing, whilst waiting for the Day of the Lord.

Have you ever stopped to think about the number of things we take on trust?

For example, if I turn on a tap at home, I trust that water will come out (usually).

Or, if I sit on a chair, I believe that it will hold me up, unless it's broken.

Thousands of little things that we believe in, or trust, help us to construct our daily routines, providing the foundation of our lives.

So at the basic level,
what we believe or trust *determines what we do*.
What I believe or trust *determines my behaviour*.

You'd assume that what religious people believe would affect their behaviour.

We see how important it was to the emerging ancient Israelite nation in the 10 commandments.

And we see how important behaviour was to Jesus, in his teachings, and to the apostle Paul and to the other Christian NT writers.

Today, we have heard these verses from 1 Thess chapter 5:

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

Today is the 3rd Sunday of Advent and during Advent we've been hearing Bible readings all about preparing and waiting for the coming of Jesus. Not just his coming at Christmas, of course, but his coming again in the future, his 'second' coming. This is something Jesus promised to his disciples would happen and the early Christians thought Jesus' return would be imminent, within their lifetime.

These words from 1 Thessalonians were written to one of those first Christian communities. The Christians in Thessalonica were converted Greeks, and had turned from worshipping the many idols that pervaded Greek culture. As a result, they were heavily persecuted, and could even be stoned to death.

Paul wrote two letters to them, to encourage them and give them support. They apparently wanted to know what happened to them if they died before Jesus returned, so he wrote to tell them what he thought about that.

This is the context of the verses from 1 Thess that we heard this morning.

They were waiting for the return of Jesus.

This letter is instruction from Paul to one of the first Christian communities in *how to behave whilst waiting for the return of Jesus*.

He is encouraging them and exhorting them to maintain their Christian behaviour, whilst waiting for the change in the cosmos that God will bring about in the future.

Right back at the beginning of chapter 4, he says, “We ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as in fact you are doing), you should do so more and more.”

Then he goes on to remind them of some particular things that means. Here is a list of all those mentioned in the passage from chapter 5 we heard today:

- Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; give thanks in all circumstances;
- 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.”

Paul obviously had some high expectations of the behaviour of the first Christian communities. And he obviously expected them to go on behaving as they always had been doing, even though they (and he) didn't know when Jesus' return would come. They weren't to

give up. What they believed would happen was to continue to determine their behaviour.

Well, we are still waiting.

We are still in the same situation that the Thessolonians found themselves. Alive. Living in that 'in-between' time, waiting for Jesus' return.

There are some sections of the Bible which we can apply directly to our own lives, and this is one such example. It's a description of moral behaviour which transcends time and place.

So first, we should “Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; give thanks in all circumstances”.

Some may say this is an impossible undertaking!

How can we possibly 'rejoice' and 'give thanks' in every situation we find ourselves?

Well, we may think that some situations don't lend themselves to us 'rejoicing';

but then, neither did the situation that the Thessolonians were in...and Paul was saying it to them first.

One of the reasons for Paul's letter to them was to encourage them, to build them up as an early Christian community. Commentators refer to the way he encourages their self-identity, their identity *as a Christian community*. And for them, this was to be seen supremely *in their behaviour*. They believed different things to people around them; they were therefore to behave differently.

I came across a little book the other day, by the writer Joyce Huggett, called “Finding God in the Fast Lane” (written in 1993) and it’s a book to help people to “encounter God anywhere and everywhere”. She bases it on her reading of a book called “The Practice of the Presence of God” by a monk called Brother Lawrence; he was famous for praying whilst doing the washing up in his monastery and finding stillness with God in his manual labour.

Joyce Huggett’s theme in her book is that it is possible for *everyone* to encounter God anywhere and everywhere.

She describes Brother Lawrence’s definitions of the phrase ‘Practising the Presence of God’. It is:

- A directing of our spirit to God;
- A remembrance of God which can come about either through the imagination or the mind;
- An alertness towards God;
- A wordless conversation with him;
- Confidence in him.

It also involves:

- Paying God ‘simple attention’ and
- Recognising that we have a prayer place in our heart, acknowledging that God is nearer to us than we can ever imagine.

May be this approach could be helpful for us? May be our identity as Christians could be helped by us being more aware of God, bringing him into every circumstance we are in, finding out how to do that?

Secondly, Paul says,
“Do not quench the spirit”.

Ah, yes, of course – the Spirit!

In all our thinking about Christian behaviour so far, we have not remembered that the Holy Spirit is with us.

He was with the Thessolonians, helping them to live lives that identified them as Christians, and he is with us now!

“Do not quench the spirit” means ‘do not stop the spirit’, ‘do not put it out’. The fact that he’s saying this implies that it *is* possible to quench the Holy Spirit, to put barriers in his way that stop him being able to do his work.

Bishop Graham Cray has written about the role of the Spirit in the church, saying, ‘the essence of the Spirit’s work is communion or *relationship*’...’The Spirit maintains the possibility of meaningful relationships and interconnection within a fallen world, while promoting the cause of Christ in the world.’

(Grove Book L1, Discerning Leadership)

The Holy Spirit is what gives Christians our identity.

The Holy Spirit is the person of the Trinity who helps us *in our relationships* to live as Christians.

He helps us to rejoice, to pray and to give thanks unceasingly – without him, we can't do it.

He helps us to change our behaviours so that we can be seen by others to be Christian – so that our behaviour matches our beliefs.

The passage from Thessalonians continues with some specifically Spirit-led behaviour: (vv. 20-22)

“Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything;

Hold fast to what is good;

Abstain from every form of evil”

Abstaining from evil means not indulging in sin.

Indulging in sin shows that our behaviour does not match up to our beliefs.

A good example of quenching the Spirit.

So then, even though it may seem impossible, perhaps we could, with the Holy Spirit's help, learn how to 'Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; and give thanks in all circumstances';

Perhaps we could look at our own behaviour and think to ourselves, 'If I was arrested for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict me?'

Paul finished his letter to the Thessalonians with a prayer, which we can take for ourselves:

(v 23): “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.***”

This is the work of the Holy Spirit in us, here and now.

The work of God,

changing our behaviour

so that we know our identity as Christians,

both in our own lives

and in that of the community of Christians

to which we belong,

this church.

And we can rely on Paul's final promise:

(V24): “The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.”

Amen.