

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-6 Advent 3

I had an interesting encounter this week....

I met someone outside the Post Office that I knew slightly - not a church member - and we exchanged pleasantries. Then she said, “you know, when I saw you, I suddenly had the thought that everything I do in life I do for myself. I don’t do anything for other people....”

I thought, “Aww... do I really have that effect on people? That they take one look at me and feel guilty about their life?” As I thought some more about this, I decided that the encounter probably said more about this person’s concept of God than it did about me.

There are many, many people, outside the church (and maybe even within) who view the Christian life as a joyless one of rules and regulations, of ‘oughts’ and ‘shoulds’ - and view God as a punitive figure, ready to pounce on anyone who steps out of line.

Sadly, sometimes even Christians can give that impression – that life is one big trial, to be stoically endured. That serving God is a teeth-gritting duty.

But in our reading from Philippians today, Paul’s focus is on rejoicing – and how through it, to experience a deep, abiding, supernatural peace in our lives as a result. The Christian life is not something to be endured – it is something to be rejoiced in!

Rejoicing is also the third element of our Advent preparation. If you’ve been here for the last couple of weeks, you’ll remember that on the first Sunday in Advent, we looked at the fact that during Advent, we consider and prepare for Jesus return in Glory – not just his coming at Christmas (**Come**).

Then last week, we looked more closely on how we can prepare ourselves for his coming – and that was through repentance and the pursuit of holiness. (**Prepare**).

Today’s readings remind us that **rejoicing** is also part of preparing for Christ’s coming. (**Rejoice**)

If we concentrated on just the first two aspects of Advent - the signs that herald Christ’s return, and the need to be prepared to meet Jesus when he does return –

we could be forgiven for perhaps becoming somewhat anxious. The signs that this world is hurtling to a close are all around us. Every time we turn on the TV there is a report of some new terrorist attack, or natural disaster, or financial crisis. If we take it on board, it's enough to make anyone depressed! And of course the need to be personally prepared to meet Jesus face to face is sobering stuff.

We need to be reminded to rejoice, otherwise we can find ourselves sinking into the mire of our troubles, our difficulties, our suffering.

Let me say at this point that rejoicing is not the same as being happy. To *rejoice* is an act of the will. To be happy, is a *feeling*, largely dependent on one's circumstances. Happiness is not something we can generate.

Do you remember this song? (“Don’t Worry, Be Happy” - Bobby Ferrin)

Catchy, isn't it? But it's philosophy is all wrong. We can't decide to “be happy.” However, we can decide to rejoice. The song would be much better if it went...“Don't worry – rejoice.”

To rejoice means to intentionally bring to mind those things that we can give thanks and praise for, and to be glad about them. And it's more than just “counting our blessings”. It's placing our focus on God for who he IS, for the relationship we have with him and for his promises that are rock solid, rather than just for the things he's given us.

Rejoicing is something we **choose** to do. It is not dependent on warm fuzzy feelings of well being, which we would normally call happiness. It's an act of the will.

The Philippian Christians were facing difficult times. By this time in the history of the church, they'd separated from the Jewish synagogue, and were classified as an illegal religion. The Romans saw them as a nuisance and a threat. The Christians were having their property confiscated, their employment terminated, they were being arrested, beaten and imprisoned. It was really tough being a Christian!

Paul wrote to encourage them in their faith during this time of difficult persecution. He wanted to convey to them that even in the midst of all the suffering, stress and difficulty they were going through, they could experience a **deep and abiding supernatural peace** – something given by God, that was beyond all human understanding.

And there was something they could actually do that would bring this about. However, it wasn't so much through a change in their circumstances. It was through a change in their hearts.

As with so many of God's promises, the fulfillment of this promise was conditional. If they wanted to experience the blessing, they needed to meet the conditions. So Paul laid out for them how they could experience this.

Incidentally, this is one of those promises in Scripture, that despite its cultural context, applies to each one of us. In the midst of our own stress and difficulty and suffering – whether that's personal, at a community level, or even a global level – we too can experience this wonderful supernatural peace from God, in the midst of our difficult circumstances.

Just think for a moment. As we gather here this morning – is there anything in our lives which is stressing us out – other than Christmas – we do that to ourselves! Is there anything that is burdening us, worrying us, weighing on us? Occupying our thoughts....? Then Paul has something to say to us this morning.

So what are the conditions, then, if we are to experience this deep, supernatural peace from God?

- **The first is to rejoice.**

“Rejoice!” says Paul. And then he emphasises his point – “I’ll say it again – Rejoice!” He really wants to get across to his readers that this is something they not only can, but must do. We needed to intentionally be glad about all that God is, for our relationship with him and for all that he’s promised. We need to keep those things at the forefront of our minds. We need to dwell on them, rehearse them.

- The second condition is to **let our gentleness be evident to all**. At first glance this might seem an odd condition. But it's not. In fact, it comes about as a result of meeting the first condition. Rejoicing generates trust. And a gentle spirit is a peaceful spirit – a trusting spirit. There is no need to be pushy – to try and make things happen, to be anxious or frenetic about things. A gentle spirit trusts and rests in God. If we are stressed out or hassled or anxious about anything, we need to take a deep breath, and stop struggling. Give it to God. And relax, knowing that God is with us and in us. And we need to let our gentleness of spirit be evident to everyone – it needs to colour our speech and our actions.
- The third condition is something pro-active that we can do. It's to **pray**. This is something we can actually get our teeth into. **“Do not be anxious about anything,”** says Paul, **“but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”**

Instead of being anxious, we are to do something else. We are to bring our concerns to God:

*We are to PRAY about them. I was talking to a someone from church recently whose life was in rather a mess, and I asked her, “Have you prayed about this?” She said, “Not really.” So often, we don't want to trouble God with our personal problems. We think we should save prayer for the big stuff. Yet anything which causes us anxiety, is something we're told to bring to God in prayer. That might be ill health, or relationship problems - or it might be our wilting tomato plants! **“Do not be anxious about ANYTHING”** says Paul, **“But in EVERYTHING by prayer”** he says. We are to pray about anything and everything. Not just the big stuff!

*Then when we pray, we need to be bold enough to ASK for what we need. **“In everything by prayer and PETITION”** says Paul. Petition means making a request. We need to ASK. We need to be honest and forthright about it. Though God knows what we need before we ask, there is something important and powerful about verbalising our requests – for us.

*And then we need to pray with THANKSGIVING. As we pray, we need to thank God that he has heard us. Thank him that he is at work. Thank him that nothing is too hard for him.

As we rejoice, and as we pray to God, asking him for our needs, with a thankful heart – you know what happens? Our focus changes, the Holy Spirit ignites our faith, and we find that our inner being is flooded with “the peace of God which passes all understanding”.

And then we find that the peace which comes, will “**keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus**”. It’s a circular thing. As we bring our troubles and anxieties to God, meeting the conditions, the promise of his supernatural peace is fulfilled in our lives, and that peace in turn guards the deepest parts of our being – our hearts and minds – and **keeps** us focused on Christ Jesus. And the peace remains.

Our part is to get the ball rolling.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice. Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Let’s pray.