

ADVENT 3 2020 (Year B) – 1 Thess 5:16-24;
John 1:6-8,19-28

‘Stay alert, control the virus, save lives’

This is possibly the most familiar of the 3-pronged sound-bite slogans that the government have used this year. Advice intended to help keep us safe through the Corona virus pandemic.

But as I read today’s scripture from Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, I suddenly realised that Paul was way ahead of Boris and the government when it comes to such slogans!

‘Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances’....

2000 years ago Paul was already giving 3-pronged sound-bite advice, to the Christians in Thessalonica – instruction intended to keep them safe and protected from being tempted away from the good news of Jesus Christ that they had only recently heard and accepted..... *Advice to strengthen their faith and draw them closer to God.....* And advice that continues to remain as important for us today.

For whilst the government’s advice has been intended to keep us alive, Paul’s advice is intended to keep us connected *to the source of all life.*

I wouldn't be surprised though if many of us have heard or read Paul's words today and thought 'oh really!'

Because as we continue to live through and feel the effects of a year where our world globally and personally has been turned upside down..... where people have lost lives, jobs, security, and mental health continues to rise more than ever; where things we have taken for granted have stopped, or at least we've had to learn to do them differently ... where even Christmas will not be spent in the way we have enjoyed in the past to be told to: *'Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances'*.... can be particularly difficult to hear!

But please bear with me: because without wanting to sound like my mum - who when I was younger would dish me up some dinner I didn't like the look of, or ask me to do something that I didn't want to, and reply to my remonstrations with the words: "it will be good for you darling!" – I would similarly advocate that these words of Paul's really *are* good for us to hear and to be reminded of; maybe even more so when things are difficult.

Because as I said earlier they show us how to draw closer and deepen our relationship with the source of all life... to the God who loves us more than we can imagine, who calls us by name, and

who wants us to have the fullness of life that He created us for.... and who is *faithful*.

So, let us look more closely at Paul's rallying cry, which just like the government's 2020 slogans, contains 3 separate pieces of advice that are in fact all inter-twined and related. Something reminiscently Trinitarian

So firstly Paul tells us to: "*Rejoice always*"
And joy here is something that is quite independent of any outward circumstances. Joy is in fact a gift of the Holy Spirit, whose job it is to keep Christians at all times connected to the life of God, offered in Christ, through whom we see the full nature and glory of God.

Joy is therefore not dependent on prosperity, health, luck or anything external, but on the extraordinary gift that God's Spirit gives us; of being part of the life and work of God, who is the essence of joy itself.

And because God created us all to be in loving relationship with Him and all His creation, when we know His unconditional love, God's Spirit-inspired joy is something we want to share with others ...
And so, similarly to John the Baptist, spoken of in our gospel reading as being sent to prepare the way for Jesus, we also become heralds of God's love and faithfulness.

So moving on to the middle section of Paul's triple slogan: to "*pray without ceasing*"..which for me is really the glue that holds all 3 parts together..... It is the key to keeping connected to God. It is not surprising therefore that it is the one thing that the devil tries to stop us doing!

For most of us even to pray for a couple of hours a day can sound daunting, let alone to pray without ceasing! But this is possibly because we can make the subject of prayer far more complicated than it really is.

For prayer is really about relationship – that part of a relationship in which we talk and share things with someone we are close to..... Things that we see or experience, fears, frustrations, anxieties that we have..... All those things in our life, good and bad, that we want to tell someone we trust about..... And God is there for us – His hand holding ours and never letting go, which means we can be connected constantly with Him. And so prayer is like an open phone-line with a continuous connection with the One who never sleeps and is there 24/7 waiting and wanting to have that conversation with us.

Furthermore it is a 2-way conversation – as all relationships should be..... because listening to God is even more important than talking to Him for it is in listening that we will be shown His help and guidance and fully realise His blessing.

Which brings me on to the last part of Paul's sound-bite!

To *“give thanks in all circumstances”*

Because it is as our relationship grows and our connectedness with God deepens that we are able to recognise His hand working good in all things.

In knowing that God is there and cares and is faithful, and that He only ever has our best interest at heart, we are able to see the goodness of God everywhere – in the smallest of things, and even in the most difficult and hardest times in our life.....

And therefore in God's strength, with the Spirit-given gift of His joy, and the connectedness of a closer relationship, our thanks and praise becomes possible in all circumstances.

Which is one of the ways we do herald to others the wonder of His love.....

And what a blessing it is when we meet people like this. One lady comes to mind, known to many of us, who is a wonderful testimony to this... having lost her husband to Covid earlier in the year she has been remarkable in the way she has continuously been thankful for God's blessings through and after his death – thanking God for the fact that he was able to remain at home until he died, and then being grateful to God for the kindnesses she has been shown by so many around her..... Despite her circumstances she has found a way to be thankful.....

‘Stay alert, control the virus, save lives’ – is a slogan that hopefully will soon become a distant memory; just as the face masks and hand gel that have become second nature to us and take with us wherever we go, will soon not be needed.

‘Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances’ however, are the much-needed words of encouragement that I pray will stay with us today, and will remain and take root within our hearts and minds in an even deeper way. Because whatever we’re going through in our lives, God is there, and is faithful; and to be connected to Him is what we were created to be, and is the only thing that will give us true life.

AMEN