

Seeking the peace of God

Third Sunday in Advent (C)

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And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

I wonder how many times you have heard these words said to you or over you as a blessing. It was as I began to focus on today's sermon that it occurred to me that although we always take this as a sentence on its own, its construction suggests that the essence of it is not that, but rather it is a consequence of the preceding passage. If you fulfil the above then this thing will happen.

It is an interesting exercise, if you were to take a bible, a red pencil and a green pencil. Go through the text and underline the promises in green and demands or conditions in red. You will find that a pattern emerges, that suggests that the good things are linked to conditions or requirements. Green follows red. The old tradition of a promise box where it is possible to select a promise of God, ignoring the conditions is quite deceptive.

So we should understand that the things that God gives us are a consequence of our behaviour. This should not come as a surprise, as we say it every week – forgive us our sins, as we forgive others. It is not so much that we earn our way to heaven, but our experience of the Christian life will be governed by how we live.

I am not talking about heaven or ultimate salvation, but about our experience of God in this life. We all know some Christians have a better run in life than others, and I am not referring to the experience in life, but as to how we handle it.

Some Christians seem to have one foot in heaven already, while many of us struggle with day to day living. Simply put, they are already experiencing the Peace of God in their lives. But can you or I truly say that we have this yet?

I don't think that this a reward system, but rather the experience, which results from behaviour. To put it crudely, if I was to drink a dozen stubbies in an hour, my experience would be a number of physical consequences, including most probably falling down a lot. My experience is a consequence of my action. Similarly, my Christian experience would be a consequence of my action as well.

So how do we find the peace that is promised. Paul has provided us with a checklist in the preceding verses:

- Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.
- Let your gentleness be known to everyone.
- The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything,
- but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving
- let your requests be made known to God.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Remember that Paul wrote this from Prison. He was not holidaying or on a mountain to experience, he was at one of the dark points of his life and ministry, but he says **REJOICE**.

How could he do this?

I imagine that it is because he had a vision beyond the here and now. Christ was so real that the things of this world became so insignificant. Earlier in the letter he had postulated whether his future was in heaven or on earth, and had decided to take what ever would come. He feared neither death nor life for he lived with an eternal life perspective.

So many Christians seem to live in fear of heaven. They are caught up in this world, and more so in the cares and worries of this world that to look at them, you would not think that they believed that they had eternal life. For if they did, they would rejoice – their lives, no matter what would be marked with the Joy of knowing their inheritance of eternal life.

So the starting point for peace is to live with joy in the Lord.

Paul then says Let your gentleness be known to everyone. How much conflict that we face is the result of our own attitude? If we are aggressive towards others, then we invite their aggression in return. But if we are seen as gentle, then gentleness will come back to us. Peace and peaceful relationships will grow out of our gentleness, not our aggression. Many Christians are surprisingly aggressive, given our Lord's comment, that the meek will inherit the earth, and his behavioural model of silently going to the cross. Gentleness will open us up to experience this peace of God.

Then Paul says: The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything. Peace and worry are incompatible. How can we have peace, when our lives are full of cares and worries? Our worries, do more than just rob us of peace, but teach us to deny the sovereignty of God in all circumstances.

You see either God is in control, or not. If I grow anxious, I am losing sight of God in the situation. I am pushing him out of the picture and more importantly, I am taking control of the circumstances myself. I would love to tell you that my life is worry free, but sadly it is not. But I worry about less things now than I did ten years ago and it is a learning curve for each of us to learn to trust. It is my belief that God will lead us, if we let him, to situations that require us to depend on him more and more. Even more directive than that, that there is a persistence of God to take us beyond our means to learn to trust more.

And last part is the lesson in trust: in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. Let God in on the act. Let God into each and every part of your life. Live each day in constant communication with your heavenly father through and active prayer life. This is the solution to worry – to hand the situation over to God. To let him deal with it, whether it is looking for a parking space in the Christmas rush, or facing Cancer. And with thanksgiving – *Eucaristo* in the Greek, which is one way we describe Holy Communion as Eucharist. As a parent, the most frustrating thing is the lack of gratitude of the child. And how often do we forget to show gratitude to God. Not just for the big things, but in everything.

James says “every good and perfect gift comes from our heavenly father.” But do we acknowledge it?

So in this season of peace, are we going to find it? I invite you to reflect on your life as it is. Do you have this indescribable peace, or is it something you only see in others?

So let us seek joy, gentleness and gratitude casting our cares on the Lord and live with the full expectation of eternal life. Let us live in God’s presence, not just on Sunday, but each and every day that we might be overwhelmed with this peace.

And do you know what will happen? The world will notice and be drawn to Jesus and the peace he offers to those who believe. Could there be any more effective means of evangelism?

AMEN