

Preparing for Christ's Coming With Joyous Thanksgiving

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

What a joy it is to begin a new Church Year. Because “the mercies of the Lord are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22)”, we can leave behind the faults and failures of the past year and begin a new chapter in our relationships with God and with one another. What a blessing it is to begin this Advent season with a new addition to the family of God through the sacrament of Holy Baptism. The Baptism of any person, of any age, is reason for joyful thanksgiving in our Church community; as we are thankful for all the blessings our own Baptism has brought us. Baptism has everything to do with our daily lives. “It means that our sinful self, with all its evil deeds and desires, should be drowned through daily repentance; and that day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever.” [Luther]

As we begin the Advent season and prepare for Christmas today, it is fitting that we renew our own commitment to Christ and to pray for one another with new zeal and enthusiasm, as St Paul does so often in his letters to us. 2019 should be for us a year of generous gratitude, where we thank God regularly for all the people in our lives who have been such a blessing to us. What a joy the year ahead would be if every day is marked by spontaneous expressions of thankfulness.

Gratitude was rare before Jesus came along. The New Testament records outbursts of thanksgiving like never before. This is especially so in St Paul's letters, where expressions of gratitude to both God and fellow church members exceed requests to God. Thanksgiving takes up the largest part of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, as we read today.

Today's text begins, “How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we feel before our God because of you (v9)?” Imagine how glad these words made the Christians who received them feel! How do you feel when someone unexpectedly expresses in joyful terms their gratitude to you? I'm sure it makes you feel really good inside. St Paul made the giving of thanks a favourite form of Christian expression.

In giving thanks for all the support the members of the Church gave Paul, he was rejoicing before God on their behalf. It was Paul's passion and desire to increase thanksgiving wherever the good news of God's grace is heard, welcomed and cherished. He writes, “Grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God.” (2 Corinthians 4:15) We don't fully understand how utterly undeserved God's grace to us is without being forever grateful for it. The truest test of joy is gratitude. Many Christians have said that thankfulness is one of the best feelings they've ever experienced, much better than being a celebrity or having an abundance of worldly goods.

Gratitude has little to do with how much we have or don't have. It has everything to do with how grateful we are for all that God has given us. I've often found that the people who have the least earthly goods are the most grateful for the ordinary blessings of everyday life, things like food to eat, the love of their family and friends, as well as the blessings their church membership gives them. Gratitude unites us with God the Giver of all good gifts. In giving gifts we give what we can

spare, but in giving thanks to God, we offer our whole selves to God as a living sacrifice that's an act of worship pleasing in His sight.

A certain Pastor Whyte was renowned for always finding something to thank God for in every situation. One Sunday morning when the weather had been awful, Pastor Whyte began praying, "God, we thank You that the weather isn't always like this!"

St Paul's prayers are also expressions of joy and gratitude. He writes to his fellow Christians, "I thank God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you." (Philippians 1:3) Not even being in prison can quench the joy Paul experiences in praying for others. Your prayers for other people do much more good than you think, both for them and for you. The Holy Spirit takes over when you pray to Him. The God you pray to is able to do far more than all you can ask or imagine.

To pray joyfully and gratefully is to believe in miracles, especially the miracle of how God can transform your life into a life filled with love, patience, kindness, generosity and gentleness. There's nothing that makes us love someone else as much as praying for them. Hence in today's second reading, St Paul prays, "May the Lord make your love for one another and for everyone else grow by leaps and bounds." (v12) Love involves putting other people and their needs ahead of our own. Christian love sees Jesus in the other person and it sees the other persons in our daily life as Christ's gifts to us, for our growth in caring, kindness and compassion.

As we ask our Lord to help us grow in love, He shows us that the people we find difficult to get on with are the one He has placed in our lives to strengthen and increase our love in wonderful ways. We now take the initiative in seeking to restore a broken relationship with someone who is no longer in a loving relationship with us. A growing love apologises more than seems necessary, and willingly takes more than its share of the blame when things have gone wrong. Love enables us to walk hand in hand, even when we don't see eye to eye. It accepts the other person as they are and is quick to forgive and forget.

A growing love is not touchy or out to impress, but rather delights in saying good things about others and explaining their actions in the kindest way possible. We recall how Christ in His love for us keeps no record of our wrongs. Instead His love bears all things, hopes all things and endures all things we do. His love never gives up on you. His love wants to make a new beginning in your relationship with Him as He says to you, "Greater love has no one than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are My friends." Jesus is the best Friend you could ever have. Let His friendship for you permeate everything you think, say or do, as you thank Him for giving His life for you.

"In this is love, not that we loved God but that God loved us and sent His Son to pay the price for our sins." (1 John 4:10). Because of this, we can look forward so much to both Christ's coming to us at Christmas to bless our celebration of His birth as one of us, and to His final appearance to us on the Last Day. Imagine how sterile and dull would be the end of our calendar year without the celebration of Christmas!

Because Christ's comes to us today in His Sacred Supper, Holy Communion, we can celebrate His birth with joy and enthusiasm. Our Lord gave thanks as He instituted Holy Communion for us because of the limitless joy we would receive in this Feast of Thanksgiving. The more often Christians received Holy Communion, the more they called it "the Eucharist" which means "Meal of Thanksgiving". May we continue to receive this wonderful Means of Grace with grateful hearts as long as we live.

So then, today we thank God for giving us another year of grace. We give thanks to our Lord for every act of faithfulness and love evident in this church over the past twelve months. We're grateful for all those who have gone out of their way to serve our Lord in countless ways behind the scenes. We praise God for musicians, singers and all who have so diligently served on this church's rosters. We thank God for every expression of gratitude we've seen or experienced over the last twelve months in our homes or in our community.

Gratitude is not only the greatest Christian virtue; it's also the mother of every other virtue. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "In ordinary life we hardly realise that we receive a great deal more than we give, and that it is only with gratitude that life becomes rich."

"O give thanks to the Lord for He is good and His love lasts forever." (Psalm 136:1)

Amen.