

December 14, 2014

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

"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"

St Paul's words in his first letter to the church in the Greek city of Thessalonica

Ancient Thessalonica was founded in 315 BC by King Cassander of Macedon, one of the successors who fought over the Empire of Alexander the Great.

The history of Thessalonica spans more than 2,300 years. An important metropolis by the time of the Roman empire, Thessalonica was to become the second largest and wealthiest city of the Byzantine Empire.

The modern day city of Thessalonica is Greece's second major economic, industrial, commercial and political centre, and a major transportation hub for the rest of southeastern Europe;.

I offer you this historical perspective to demonstrate how successful Saint Paul was in identifying key centers in which to build the church.

This morning we are but eleven days away from Christmas Day. This being the case, we are **preparing** for Christmas with all that that entails

We will return later to the word **preparing** in terms of how that word has a very different meaning to us individuallythe different ways we prepare for Christmas day.

In many homes I know it is absolutely taboo but there are occasions when we do open Christmas gifts a little early !!!!

I can remember one Christmas in Wales when my Mum and Dad even allowed my sister and I to open one gift before we went to midnight mass on Christmas Eve.

As believers, we are waiting for Jesus to come again. So, I know it's early, I know it's not Christmas nor has Christ come again. But God reveals gifts to us today that he wants us to open and use before Christ comes.

Let us read again what those gifts are:

Be joyful always..... pray continually.....give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything..... Hold on to the good.

Avoid every kind of evil. May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.

May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

I believe when Christ's Community of Faith was formed, that is when our Christian Church came into being.,then we were provided with the physical means of not being alone. Spiritually we have never been alone, God the Father made certain of that with the gift of The Holy Spirit.

But with the Church we are never alone in that we have Christian family members available to help us cope with the challenges that our Lord Jesus lays down for us.

For almost twenty years as a deacon, as I have learned and grown, I have experienced a growing trust...a trust expressed by my fellow Christians in my ability to understand, to empathize and to provide some input to help my friends deal with problems in their lives.

But there has been a growing trust in the other direction. My trust in the inherent goodness and willingness of our Christian communities in their ability to face up to the challenges and work that has to be done in all our lives and recognizing the gifts that God has provided all of us.

In the past years I have increasingly worked with fellow Christians in challenging some great evil in this world and avoiding the evil that it does not take over our lives.

Evil that includes egregious exploitation by narcissistic, egotistical, money grubbing or amoral individuals over other more vulnerable souls.

The power and insidiousness of this evil has been an incredible education for me and for those closest to me on this journey.

Another profound experience has been the vulnerability and struggle of so many individuals in the face of rampant and chronic mental illness.

I am convinced that we as individuals of Faith are not and should not be alone in this world. It is for us together, by helping each other that will make certain we open and use God's gifts as described in the first Letter to the Thessalonians that we read today.

Today we are at Pink Sunday or Gaudete (Gaudete) Sunday in Advent.....Gaudetethe Latin word for Rejoice. Traditionally this is

the Sunday in Lent when we suspend our disciplines and rules for waiting for our Lord and rejoice in the fact of His coming into our world.

But let us also rejoice in our ability to defeat evil, even though it takes its toll in emotion and enormous expending of energy. Let us also rejoice in our ability to manage mental illness to the point that sufferers may lead a more normal life.

On this Pink Sunday let us rejoice but..... as I alluded to earlier, the preparing for Christmas in our everyday activities goes on full steam ahead...only 11 days to go.

Sale after sale Christmas Cards sent overseas, to people we just spoke to last week. Travel plans, recipes dug out of old dog-eared books and stress, anxiety, depression, unspecified illnesses. Laryngitis, stomach ailments, you name it...we got it.

All the gifts given by God – the joy, the prayer, the thanksgiving in all things, the Word given to us by the Spirit. They all are God's early Christmas presents for our use before Christ comes.

Paul concludes his letter to the church in Thessalonica with a prayer together with words that are the answer to that prayer.

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

What a perfect conclusion to an Epistle.

In the first two weeks of Advent, we have seen our wretchedness in sin. We've heard our need to repent and believe. We've learned what life without God means – no joy, no answered prayer, no reason to give thanks, no truth, and no blamelessness on the Last Day.

But as surely as the candle color on the Advent wreath is different this week, so surely does God reveal his works and his gifts on our behalf. The one who calls us is faithful and he will deliver on His promises.

God will not fail to support us when we need Him. He will not fail to deliver us from evil. He will not fail to keep us, to guard and defend us.

We need that confidence while we wait for Christ to come! Just to know that God won't stop bringing us joy, answering our prayers, and giving us a reason to give thanks in all things.

While we are lacking so much of ourselves, God fills up every missing piece with his gifts.

Today let us rejoice together and let us prepare ourselves in the appropriate way for His coming, for the birth of our Lord Jesus in the crèche ...just 11 days from now,

..... Amen.