

## SERMON FOR THE 15<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

(Cape Town - 24 August 2008)

**Text:** Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus (1 Thess 5:16-18).

The last two weeks have been one of fluctuating emotions. There have been times when I was extremely happy, and then again moments of deep sadness and disappointment.

I came down from Synod one and half weeks ago very happy. Decisions were taken which will have a positive spin-off on our congregation. But then I watched the Rugby match against the All Blacks last Saturday. It was really bad. Both Maggi and myself were grumpy for the rest of the day. Unfortunately Sunday wasn't much better. We came to church excited to tell you about Synod, but for whatever reason, there weren't too many people at church. That was a bit of low.

But then came yesterday. It was a great day. I know, we lost the Rugby ... again. But I didn't watch it. I was at a Seminar in Constantia called *The Truth Project*. I heard the most wonderful talks on the "truth" of God and how we need to rediscover God in our lives again. So while I was rejoicing at the Seminar, most of you were disgruntled with the Springboks.

But that is the way it goes. Sometimes we are happy and then again we are sad. Our emotions fluctuate all the time. Sometimes we don't even know why. But usually they are linked to a particular experience we are having. If you have been sick in bed all of last week, I can imagine you won't be very cheerful today. Or worse, if you have been battling financially, or you are totally overworked, you are sad.

If that is how you are feeling right now, then this sermon text may just hit you like a cold shower. Paul writes: "**Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances**". Two weeks ago I drove out of my garage and never looked in the review mirror - when I suddenly heard this loud crash. I had just driven into a car of one of our youth members. Be joyful always... give thanks in all circumstances! I can tell you, it didn't work for me then, nor for the youth member in whose car I had crashed.

So what is Paul talking about it? We will not understand this passage, if we hear it legalistically. In other words, as a kind of commandment: You *must* always be joyful, you *must* always be thankful. No person experiencing real hardship is comforted or helped by such words.

But the apostle Paul is *not* reprimanding his congregation. These are words of encouragement. Paul is uttering an "invitation". In other words, no matter what you are experiencing right now, God is *inviting* you to be joyful. Without God it is not going to happen. But "he" is *inviting* you to be joyful. That this passage is indeed to be interpreted this way is confirmed by the last line, where Paul says: "**For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.**"

When I read this passage from a Christ-perspective, it is great. So, let us have a closer look at what Paul says.

First he says: Be joyful always.

Just to latch onto what we have already said: People reading these words may think: Paul must have had a great life, with little trouble or hardship. He didn't know what it means to fail, he didn't know what it means to stand before a mountain of troubles so high, that you are sacred to even start climbing.

If that is what you think, you are mistaken. Paul knew hardship. In 2 Corinthians 11 he provides us with a list of his suffering. It stretches over half a chapter long. In Philippians 4 he writes: ***"I know what it is to be in need..."*** (4:12). I know what it feels like. But then he continues and says: ***"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation."***

These words are remarkable in themselves. But do you know where he writes this letter from (this letter known as the "letter of joy"). He writes from prison. But he says: I "learned" (in the school of God) to be content in any and every situation.

This reminds me of a story of two monks who had read in an ancient book of wisdom that at the end of the world, where heaven and earth meet, they would discover true joy. In search of this joy, they left the monastery and travelled the world. They journeyed from one country to the next. As they crossed the seas and the mountains, they faced countless dangers and suffered terrible privations. But determined to find the door that leads to the promised joy, they toiled on.

And one day they found it. They knocked. Slowly the door opened. With pounding and hugely excited hearts the monks entered through the door. And to their amazement they discovered that they were back each one in his own cell at the monastery.

It was then that they realised: The place of true joy is not out there somewhere, but in my heart. When you have God in your heart, when you learn to "trust" him even a confined monastery is a great place to be.

This means, wherever you are, whatever you are experiencing right now (ups or downs), is "potentially" your place of joy. Joy is a matter of knowing God. Joy is a matter of "faith" that simply knows: God is holding me in his hand. In Jesus he loves me.

Paul writes to the Romans: ***"There is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus"*** He speaks about trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness and sword (all the things he experienced) and says: ***"In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us"*** (Rom.8:37).

God alone is the source of deep inner joy. This joy is not to be confused with emotions. Having different emotions is normal. It is good to laugh and good to cry sometimes. But the joy Paul speaks about is rooted in "trust". *"Faith" is what overcomes our emotions.* So, I can be sad or happy emotionally, but in my heart there is "joy", because I have God.

That is Paul's invitation. Be always joyful. No matter what you are going through: Through Christ trust God. Put him first.

## II

Secondly Paul says, pray continually.

These words are directly linked to what we have just said. Trusting God is expressed in prayer. Those who trust God, pray.

Praying “continually” obviously does not mean that I take up a prayer posture all the time. It doesn’t even mean that I speak to God all the time. It is rather a matter of being connected to him - all the time. Prayer means: I am aware of God’s grace and I tap into it all the time.

Again this is an invitation. It wasn’t always like that. In ancient times people didn’t have unlimited, or direct access to God. They had to work through a mediator, a priest. If they wanted forgiveness or express their thanks, they had to make a sacrifice and then the priest in the temple would intercede on their behalf.

Since Jesus died this has changed. Since he died the throne of God is open. We can talk to him. And because of Jesus, he listens. And as I pray, I am already helped.

Let me read to you a passage from Psalm 28. It is king David writing. He says:

Praise be to the LORD, ... The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and I am helped.

The moment he trusts God, he says, he is already helped. And he continues and says: **“My heart leaps for joy.”** There is joy even before the change actually occurs. But for David the change is already real, from the moment he started trusting God and calling his name.

## III

Thirdly, Paul says, give thanks in all circumstances.

This does seem rather hard, doesn’t it? But again, as I said, this is not a command, but words of encouragement. Obviously it is difficult to thank God when you have lost a friend, or had some other traumatic experience. But I do not thank God for the traumas in my life. I thank him for *whom he is*. I thank him for being a wonderful and loving God who send his one and only Son in the world to die for my sins. I thank him that no matter what I experience, he can use it in such a way that it will benefit me.

The question is: Do you trust him on this? Your struggle is His opportunity to make you grow in your faith. Your trouble is His opportunity to make him draw you closer to him.

We have reason to thank God all the time, in all circumstances.

So Paul is both inviting and challenging you: Be joyful always. Pray continually (never lose that connection). And give thanks in all circumstances. That is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

So, if I am ever despondent again (as if someone who has no faith), will you just remind

me of Paul's words? And if you are despondent, can I remind you?

The apostle James once said: "***You don't have, because you don't ask***". Let us ask God to work "his" joy in our lives. Amen.

Dieter Reinstorf