

Philippians 4:4-7. 4. Advent - 20.12.2015

The Lord is near

⁴ Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again - rejoice! ⁵ Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon.

⁶ Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. ⁷ If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. [NLT]

Rejoice! - when Paul wrote these words, it was not a case of: 'It's only 5 sleeps until its Christmas'. It was not until much later that Christmas was celebrated as a festival of the church.

Rejoice! - of course it's true that the reason for us, as Christians, to rejoice has its beginnings with the birth of Christ. But the much greater reason to rejoice is the fact that:

The Lord is near!

That is something different to the fact that Christmas is just around the corner - as long as our Christmas celebration is all about what we do. When it is about our traditions and the gifts we give and receive; when it's all about being with family or close friends whether we have a good Christmas - have we not bypassed God's intention of coming into our world.

God came into the world to bring peace - that is the central message of the angels as they announced the birth to the shepherds. Yet, there is so much that threatens to disrupt the peace we are to have.

That may be something - as indicated in the verses preceding this passage, where Paul addresses two members of the congregation at Philippi who seem to have had some issues with each other. What these were, we are not told here - but don't we all know how that is: how our joy is disturbed by a disagreement. So often it can be something really small that causes us great problems - but which we turn into a major matter. It seems that there is not much that is new in the history of the church!

That is why this call to **rejoice!** is so necessary. Not simply the joy at giving and receiving gifts - rather we are to **always be full of joy in the Lord**. Whatever we do, as members of the congregation and church - especially the way we live day to day - is to be done in the light of the Lord's coming to us.

Be full of joy in the Lord - not only because it will soon be Christmas. There are those who face these days with some trepidation - perhaps it's the first time that they will not have a loved person in their midst. It may give us some pause to consider that as Paul was writing these words he was in prison, awaiting the outcome of his trial. He did not know whether he would be set free or face the death sentence.

Yet, in spite of this he calls on those who read his letter to rejoice - to rejoice in the Lord at all times. Rejoice - not because you have everything you wished for, but because you have he is with us - and at the same time we are to **Remember, the Lord is coming soon**.

We are not to celebrate Christmas - we are not to live - by the fact that we celebrate Christmas just by looking back. The Lord who left his home in heaven to live among us for a while, is coming again - this time for keeps, and visibly for all people. Because we know and confess this, it is to change how we live. Living as people who wait for the return of Christ, we are to **let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do**.

Be considerate - especially with the people we deal with on a daily basis. If there is to be peace in our families, at our place of work, in the church, it has to start with us. It is often said that we should treat others the way we would like to be treated. So being **considerate** is about a change of attitude, because it is only if we live in the knowledge of the Lord being near - if we allow him to shape how we think and act -, that things can change between you and others.

Be considerate - that flies in the face of a world where we are urged to demand our rights. Yet, where we are all concerned with what we want, how will we ever find the peace we long for?

Live in the conviction that the Lord is near - the Lord, who said at his ascension that he has all power. That is why Paul can say here: **Don't worry about**

anything; instead, pray about everything.

Don't worry about anything - that does not mean that there is nothing to worry about. Please note that Paul does not say, don't be concerned about what is happening in your life or in the world around you. He is talking to people who were facing persecution because of their faith. He is talking to people who face health problems, and who do not know how to make ends meet. Don't worry! - that does not mean doing nothing, but that the first thing we should do is to **pray about everything. Tell God what you need ...**

This does not come to us naturally - it is something we need to be reminded of, and that we need to practise. As we look ahead to Christmas we are reminded again, that God came into our world because we had lost our way. He came to those who were struggling to make sense of life - who were subjected to the whims of those in power. It's so easy under those circumstances to concentrate on the misery of life - and to forget him. Because when we look only at our problems, they seem to grow bigger - and we just stand before them helplessly. The call to us is to look to God - to the Lord who is at hand, and who hears our call for help.

We call out to him, but it's good to remember also what he has done for you in the past and to **thank him for all he has done**. It may be a good thing to look back over the year since last Christmas, to see where God has heard your call, and stepped in with his help and his presence in your life.

When you look to him in this way, when his presence becomes a reality for you, **you will experience God's peace**. He grants you peace - not only for the short time of our Christmas celebrations, but as you allow the miracle of Christmas to remain with you throughout the year. It is the miracle that God really cares about you and me, that he hears your prayers. It's true, he does not always answer our prayers the way we hope for - but he is near you at all times - to hold and guide, and to grant you what you need to really have life.

God grants you his peace, **which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand**. Through Jesus' coming into our world, God has made peace with us - that is the real 'magic' of Christmas. The first thing we hear of the birth of the Lord

is the proclamation by the angels who close their Christmas message with the words: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to all whom God favours."

This peace which God grants is central to really having life - and not only at Christmas! This peace is what God offers you again as Jesus comes as the 'Prince of Peace'.

In Christ we may be at peace - with ourselves, and with our place in life. In Christ we may have peace, even if we are in stressful circumstances. That does not mean having everything, but we will learn not to stress as we live in his light - in the light of his coming again, but also by the light of his first coming at Christmas.

So rejoice - not because you hope for a perfect Christmas, but because the Lord is near! He will remain with you when the Christmas decorations have been packed away. His love and light will go with you on each day.