

Sermon
Third Sunday of Advent
St. Andrew's, Methuen
December 13, 2020
William Bradbury

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Canticle 15
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8,19-28

Are you fluent in a foreign language? I tried hard to learn Spanish in high school and had excellent teachers. But I never became fluent, because I never internalized the grammar, so I always had to stop and think before I could speak.

I bring this up because in a way, as others have said, Saint Paul is teaching his young churches a new language: not a language to speak—they were all fluent in Greek--but a language of the children of God, which involves not just some new vocabulary, but more importantly a new way of seeing and living: **seeing the world through the eyes of Christ and living in the world through the heart of Christ.**

But these new Christians had long ago internalized the grammar of paganism: seeing a threatening world under the sway of an indifferent fate and living only for themselves.

If all Paul has to do is to teach his members a few new rules for being a good person, like don't get drunk and cheat on your spouse, and don't worship stone idols, his work would be easy. But it would be like that old line about rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

What Paul needs to do is to form them into a people capable of seeing a transcendent vision and living an all-inclusive love. He is forming them into the kind of people, who as the great ship is sinking, aren't fighting each other for a seat on a life boat, but are gathered with fellow musicians playing, "Nearer My God to Thee".

Paul in the power of the Spirit is initiating them into the ever-present reality of the Risen Lord through the death of the old self, and the birth of the True Self in Christ.

In my six months as your Bridge Priest, I've made the claim that being a Christian is not about adding a few good behaviors onto the old self in order to get your ticket to heaven punched, but rather **it is about a transformation of consciousness, in which we are ever growing in our ability to see through Jesus' eyes and live out of his mind and heart.**

Last week, we heard John the Baptizer proclaim that his water baptism is for repentance and forgiveness, but that Jesus's Spirit baptism is for transformation and transcendence. This week **Paul isn't after an external change of clothes, but an internal change of soul.**

So, here's the thing: For his people to become fluent in this kind of living, they must learn not only the vocabulary but also the grammar, so Paul gives a thumbnail sketch of three profound rules of spiritual grammar for his people to practice and internalize: He teaches them to **"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances."**

I hope you can feel how countercultural, then and now, these inner practices are. Ordinary, mortal mind simply can't grasp them.

Rejoice always? How can we rejoice when almost 300,000 Americans have died from Covid-19 and more people died on December 7, 2020 than on December 7, 1941 from the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Pray without ceasing? For many that conjures up dreadful images of being in church 24 hours a day, every day. Children try to imagine a heaven in which they are in church forever with their parents constantly telling them to sit still and be quiet. If this is heaven, count me out!

Give thanks in all circumstances? Say what? Give thanks in the midst of ecological disasters and dying ecosystems? Give thanks in the midst of our national divisions which make any notion of "E Pluribus Unum" a joke?

All mortal mind can see is the tragedy of life.

But the mind of Christ sees both the tragedy **AND** the arms of Father-Mother God holding us in an eternal embrace of healing love.

If this were an hour-long workshop, we'd go through how faithful Christians have learned to always rejoice in God; how to be continually mindful of our connection with Christ; and how to give thanks, not FOR all things, but IN all things. But since we don't have an hour, I'll tell one brief story:

Several years ago, at a Bible study at All Saints', Chelmsford we talked about the importance of gratitude for growing in our life in Christ. Four weeks later an older woman said that after that first night, she decided to

take up the practice of gratitude. She said, every night before getting in bed she'd take just two or three minutes to remember her day and then she'd write in a journal a few things for which she was grateful. Instead of nursing resentments, she nursed her gratefulness.

She said over the course of that month, her mood elevated, her energy increased, and her awareness of Christ magnified—all from that simple practice.

I think of Brene Brown, famous author and Episcopalian, who says, **"We're a nation hungry for more joy: Because we are starving from a lack of gratitude."**

As you know the best way to become fluent in a foreign language is to immerse yourself in a culture that speaks it. The best way to become fluent in faith is to be immersed in a community that is operating at a higher level of consciousness; there in the Spirit they are deeply joyful, abiding in Christ, grateful to God.

Some of you will remember Dag Hammarskjold, UN Secretary General and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize back in the 1950s, who wrote in his journal, Markings:

"For all that has been, Thanks. To all that shall be, Yes."

These are the people, as Paul says, who do not quench the Spirit, so the Spirit is free to work this transformation into our lives.

We see this in the reading from Isaiah 61:
*"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me":
 because the Lord has anointed me...."*

The Spirit falls on the Blessed Virgin Mary who sings out: "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord...."

Therefore, let us join with all the faithful and pray again the opening line of the collect for the day: **"Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us...."**