

# Homily on 1 Thes 5:16-24

December 15, 2017

**Intro:** St. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is the earliest of all the NT books. It was written around 50 AD., almost 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. His audience was mostly Greeks, who had no background in the Old Testament teaching about God or morality, and so they had to work out the confluence between their pagan morality and the Jewish way of life. Further complicating this working out were the gifts of the Holy Spirit which transcended conventional morality and embodied extraordinary charisms to build up the community. Further, Paul and his community still lived in the expectation of the triumphant return of the Messiah to judge the world during their lifetime. This gave an urgency to their living of Christ's radical gospel, which demanded supernatural faith and hope. All of this led to great confusion and some bizarre activity in their church. This is the background for today's second reading on Gaudete Sunday.

**1 Thes 5:16-24:** Paul concludes all his letters with exhortations to holiness of life. Here he asks for mutual love for all, to be determined by the leaders of their community. The criterion of their conduct is what leads to the good of all. And so we come to today's passage: "Rejoice always...in all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus." In the midst of bizarre behavior by some, they are admonished not to quench the Holy Spirit in the remarkable gifts given them, and they are to attend to the prophetic utterances of those given the gift of prophecy. They are to test everything and cling to what is good. They can do this by praying without ceasing, for this is the activity which will enable them to refrain from every kind of evil and discern the good. This constant prayer is what enables the God of peace to make them perfectly holy in their entire being---spirit, soul and body. The God who is calling them in the midst of their various understandings and misunderstandings is faithful, and this God will accomplish their holiness. This fidelity of God in their midst is what enables them to rejoice always.

This Meaning is remarkably apt for us today, for we live in times of great confusion. There is the persistent secularism which says there is no God except what we make as our god. Our political discourse descends mostly to personal attacks, our economic system is impoverishing the middle class, we are enmeshed in wars which see no end, and even in our Church there is endless debate about the reforms of Vatican II. We are in even greater disarray than the members of Paul's Thessalonian church. How do we rejoice?

We rejoice by doing what Deacon Henry preached two Sundays ago---by returning to Jesus, for he is the solution to the false values which cause our confusion and decay.

We make money our god. We evaluate people by how much money they make, by the size of their homes; we turn Christmas into a consumerist feast; our political creed is "Make America Greed" and our economic policy is to rob the poor to give to the rich. Against all of this Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor; the rich will be sent away empty;" he extols the widow who gives her last coins, and he admonishes us to care for the poor and marginalized of our world.

We evaluate people on the basis of their physical attractiveness. As women age they are cast aside for younger women. This cult of beauty leads to a rampant sexuality in which women are made into sexual objects to be raped, groped, and harassed. And to that we add all forms of pornography, even of children. Against all of this Jesus says, "Do not look at a woman with lustful eyes, and be faithful to your wife." But he saw in the woman with five husbands and the adulteress women persons of dignity who needed only compassionate loving to be healed.

We evaluate people on the basis of their power or control. And that extends down to the sense of entitlement to which each of us is raised in this country. Others ought to get out of my way; the basic question of our culture is, "What's in it for me?" and "America first." Against all this Jesus came not to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for humans.

So we have a divine savior, who can lead us into the ways of integrity and justice. That's why we rejoice. And since Jesus has taken us into his own body, he is near, always with us. That's why we rejoice. And so the secret of our Christian joy is this, that being converted to the love of Jesus we have everything we need or want.

How do we come to love this Jesus? Through the gospels which give us not the plastic Jesus of some Christians, but the living power to reform our lives and find true happiness and peace. We have 8 days before Christmas. Each day take 15 minutes to read and pray on some of Luke 1-2, leading up to his birth, and then after Christmas keep reading and praying 15 minutes a day over the real Jesus. That is the Church's Christmas gift to you. "Rejoice always...give thanks for your faith and hope, found in prayer without ceasing.