

## **Philippians 4:4-9**

### **Give thanks in all circumstances**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today as we celebrate harvest thanksgiving, it's probably easier to think of all the things that are making life difficult at the moment. It's not always easy to recognise the good things we do have in life and to give thanks for them. But in our epistle reading today St Paul says to rejoice always. How can this be? If we can't always manage to be thankful, how could we possibly be always rejoicing? In my mind, rejoicing is a step up compared to thanksgiving, but according to scripture, it should fill all our life.

To understand this, we need to first look at what was going on in Paul's life at the time. He wrote to the Philippian church while imprisoned in Rome and facing a very uncertain future. This is not someone who's enjoying the good life telling everyone else to just be happy. This is someone facing beatings and terrible living conditions. But the joy he's talking about is not just a feeling of great happiness. This is something more spiritual, more connected to the greatness of God than an individual's specific circumstances.

The rejoicing is 'in the Lord'. This means it's connected to all that the Lord Jesus has done. It's a joy found in choosing to dwell on God's redemptive work in this world, even when all present circumstances might indicate that everything is lost. This is a joy found in the exaltation of Christ Jesus after his humiliation and death on a cross. This is a joy found in knowing that Christ has promised to be with us always. This is a joy found in the promise Christ made to return and bring all things to their fulfilment.

It is certainly future looking. Rejoice always, or rejoice at all times, calls for an ongoing activity. It doesn't matter what the future holds, the idea is to keep on rejoicing in the Lord at all times. Paul gave us an example of this in Acts, when he and Silas, although beaten and in prison, sang hymns and prayed to God (Acts 16:25). The 'in prison' bit didn't matter because through faith they were still 'in the Lord'. The joy was grounded not in the surroundings, but in the one who is the foundation of our faith. This sort of joy is a characteristic of life in the kingdom of God, it's a fruit of the spirit, and it's most fully revealed especially in times of suffering and trial. And because this joy is found in the Lord, St Paul reminds his readers that the Lord is near.

Whatever they are suffering now, whatever grief they are experiencing as they long for safety, whatever fear they have for their own futures, the apostle reminds them that the real King is near. Rejoicing in the Lord is possible because the Lord is with us. Even if you've got nothing left in this world, and I do mean nothing, there is still joy in Christ Jesus. Even if you're suffering in prison, there is still joy in Christ Jesus.

So, Paul can quite confidently say to rejoice always. Do not worry about anything, says the one writing from a prison cell. People might tell you all hope is lost. Your faith may well be tested. You may even suffer as Paul has suffered, or worse. To rejoice in the midst of this is not to negate or turn a blind eye to the suffering. Rejoicing in the Lord doesn't make the suffering go away or minimise the despair you may also be feeling. Rather, it's a faith-filled acknowledgement that we are serving the one and only God who can rectify the wrongs of this world. Rejoicing in the face of terrible injustice is an act of bold courage, of standing for hope in the face of despair.

The strength to do this comes from knowing that Jesus has been to all these places too. He has faced temptation and loss and despair and great suffering. And he willingly went through such things for you. He even died on the cross for you, the powers of this world killing him. But a far greater power exalted him and bestowed upon him the name which is above every name. This is the God whom we serve. This is the reason we can rejoice. God did not abandon Jesus and will not abandon us.

All of this also brings us great peace. It's a peace that passes all human understanding, a line from today's reading that we normally use at the end of a sermon. This peace keeps or guards you. It holds your hearts and your minds in the presence of Christ Jesus. This peace is not simply calmness or the absence of anxiety. It's the peace of knowing that we are safe in Christ, that even if we had absolutely nothing else, we still have an eternal future in Christ Jesus. It's the peace of knowing that your sin, your guilt, your shame, have all been dealt with by Jesus and nothing this world throws at you can undo that.

This is not a peace that we can discover for ourselves. It's beyond human understanding, beyond human reasoning, because it comes from the Holy Spirit and dwells within our spirit. It's grounded in the work of Christ to bring about the new creation, and it ground us in that new creation also. And this is how it becomes for us a source of joy.

Despite what's happening to us in the old creation, through Christ, through our baptisms into Christ, we are already part of the new creation, already experiencing the reconciliation of all things to God. And so, we must rejoice. We can't help but rejoice. There is nothing that compares and nothing that can take it away. Jesus has made us his own, cleansed us by his own blood, restored us from death to life, and given us an eternity of reasons to rejoice and gives thanks.

And so, I pray that that very peace of God, the peace which surpasses all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord and Saviour until you meet him face to face and spend eternity in his presence.

Amen.