

This morning we lit the candle symbolising repentance. Repentance as a part of the preparation sequence of advent. | Advent as each week passes we light one more candle on the Advent wreath symbolically becoming more illuminated until we get to Christmas when we have the “True Light of the World” shining forth. The lights of Advent shine into hearts looking at what they contain we are asked to deliberately engage with a process of self examination and readiness to be found “pure and blameless” in the words of Paul in today’s New Testament reading. Paul prays that the reader will have love that overflows increasingly with knowledge and full insight to be able to determine what is best and thus able to produce the harvest of righteousness.

Preparatory seasons give an opportunity to not only know God and the work of his prophets and chosen messengers but to GROW in our knowledge of him and in doing so know ourselves as Christians on a deeper level. We can be more effective witnesses and defenders of our faith – in other words, we can be modern day John the Baptists – voices crying out in the wilderness. Let us be clear life today is a wilderness. There is much

It's not only good to know what we believe, but to also know how to explain why we believe what we believe; we need to know how to defend our faith against those who believe something else. It doesn't matter how long you've been a Christian there will always be something more to know. We just need to make sure we pour ourselves out thus emptying our cups to receive more and in doing so stay teachable and grow in our knowledge of Jesus. Colossians 2:2-4, "My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments." Coming to mass, engaging in bible study, doing the daily office, or participating in retreats are all activities that grow us spiritually. We may never completely know everything there is to know, but we continue to strive for a fuller understanding of spiritual things. Knowledge and wisdom (as Solomon asked for) work well together. Knowledge is information but in wisdom we know what to do with it and how to apply it. We need both in order to function well.

Why is this reading so compelling? To my knowledge and (possibly limited research) nowhere else in religious writings of the world, outside of the Bible is there any evidence found of inner peace and praise for someone under circumstances similar to

what Paul was in. The reason why Paul could be joyful in these circumstances, and other religions not, is because there is no religion outside of Christianity that can produce a transformation of one's life equal to what Jesus Christ does in the heart of a saved individual. No one but a child of God can "count it all joy" when we are facing the trials of a troublesome life and I can safely say life has been most troublesome these past 2 years. Joy is mentioned 16 times in Philippians. Literally this book is using the catchphrase – CHOOSE JOY. We are part of a congregation, a fellowship of the faithful, in partnership and sharing a common faith.

BUT, This is not about turning up to church each week and being generous at the offertory. When we read Paul's letters we must realise they are inextricably bound up in the life and ministry of Jesus. To share in the gospel is to grasp the fullness of what it means to embrace and live in the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. A brief summary of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is summed up in the command to love God with hearts, mind, soul, and strength and to love one's neighbour as oneself. And, indeed, this is precisely what we see in Jesus. This love is not a light or trivial love, but takes up the demands of ethics (Romans 12:9-21), loving one's enemy (Matthew 5:44), and forgiveness (Matthew 6:14-15). Additionally, we would do well to remember the challenge given by Jesus as to what this means in day-to-day life. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). DAILY.

So what could this daily 'take up' look like?

Reflect on the shape of your prayers for those you love. Do you pray that loved ones will know the difference between what pleases and displeases the Lord? Or do mostly pray that you loved ones will stay safe, travel safely and have happy holidays? Do our prayers have the same urgency as Paul's? Or has the COVID-19 and its army of Greek variants made us regain some of that urgency? Has the pandemic come to bring back urgency and disrupt as Advent does our easy life of ordinary time? Will the time "after COVID" make life more special? The urgency of our prayers for our loved ones' "spiritual" well-being may even be shrunk by our assumption that they'll always have tomorrow to grow in their wise love and faithful living. Reclamation of Advent's emphasis on longing for Jesus' second coming may in fact strengthen the urgency of our prayers for all those whom God loves.

When we pray, it is so easy for us to immediately launch into a list of ways God can make our lives easier. How about a flipped prayer? Gratitude like Paul in v 3? “Thank you Father that I have just the right amount of money so I need to trust you. Thank you Father for my health problems so that I get to look forward to my resurrected body. Thank you Father for the difficult relationship I have because it’s making me appreciate Christ like values.”

Joy is a major theme in Philippians. Paul is happy because the Philippians have participated with him in believing and preaching the gospel. The word for “participation” is the same word for the “fellowship” the early church had as they sold property and possessions to care for each other’s needs (Acts 2:42-47). The Philippians are willing to give up everything to help Paul preach Christ to the world, and it makes Paul so happy.

Have you ever had someone tell you to “be happy” or “be joyful”? How well does that work? I can’t tell you to feel joy when you pray and expect it to happen. But, I can help you feel joy. Like Paul, let’s put ourselves in his shoes for a moment. As we look around at each other, let ourselves feel joy.

Prayer engages our hearts. It helps us care about each other. As we pray, let’s ask God to grow our affection, our feelings, our love, our hearts for those people we’re praying for. So when we pray for each other in church, small group, or through the prayer network, those are moments we can cultivate the love in our hearts for each other

We can in the Advent season pray for:

Love

“Heavenly Father, we pray church, our families, ourselves, fall more and more in love with you because we’re coming to know you better (wisdom). Would this love for you extend around us to our church family and each other, pressing outwards beyond our doors and beyond the parking-lot into Mona, into the city, into the frontline, into the ZOSOs, where there is crime, where there is poverty, where there is injustice. Father help us love you and others through Jesus.

Purity

A day is coming when Christ will return and judge us, bringing to light every dark thing we've hidden in our hearts. He will expose our motives and our flaws and all our sins (1 Cor 4:5). So we need to pray for each other that on that day, we will each be found to be without cracks (in Latin *sin cere*), sincere – without cracks, without flaws, pure and smooth. In other words, we need to pray, "Father, can I be less damaged! Would you work out the cracks in my life where sin seeps in?" Be mindful while we can strive and we can do things with ourselves. The fix doesn't come from us. We are like the devious merchants who can wax over our cracks and pretend they are not there, but that doesn't fix them. Only God can do that in the spirit of true repentance.

Fruit

We can pray for fruit. Paul's final prayer request in v11 is that the Philippians would be "filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ — to the glory and praise of God." The fruit of righteousness is a life that has been changed by Jesus and is bearing fruit. Remember we are Jamaicans we tend to have some fruit tree in our yard. You can have a little bit of fruit, you can have some fruit and you can have an overabundance of fruit, fruit that you can even give to others. How much fruit are you bearing? Every aspect of who you are, from the identity issues, how you treat your family and fellow church congregation how you live when nobody is watching, everything is being transformed by Jesus.

And finally

The work of God through Christ

If praying gratefully, and joyfully, and confidently, and affectionately for more love, more discernment, more purity, and more fruit, sounds a bit familiar with God the Father to you, it's because it is! It is familiar. God is not just a King, he is our Father; and his Son, the King of kings, is our brother, he is a Spirit in us. You'll find will be able to throw your arm around Christ, and he'll throw his arm around you; and then he'll show you all the things he, and his Father, and the Spirit have been doing in our lives, your life, my life and the world. Imagine that day and pray like God is at work. He is at work, in us his people wherever we are - in this chapel online or anywhere else. He is at work. So I won't close with the usual amen because the prayer goes on, it goes on every day in our lives and is a work in progress.