

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

13rd December 2020 – Third Sunday in Advent

I THESSALONIANS 5:16-24

ADVENT: CHRIST IN OUR HEARTS

‘She’s got a big heart’. ‘I am feeling very heavy hearted’. ‘He gives his all, from the heart’. ‘Deep in my heart, I know it’s true’. We use a heart as a symbol of being in love. In so many ways, and across many different cultures and times, the heart has been seen as the place from whence comes our feelings, or emotions, or commitment, or courage, or the place of faith. The ancient Egyptians, for example, when preparing a body to be preserved as a mummy would scoop out and discard all of that useless goo inside the head, but carefully preserve the heart of the deceased, because in the heart they believed, like so many others, was our being, our life. As Aussies we are proud of the fact that our great racehorse Phar Lap had a heart that weighs over 6 kilograms (you can see it in the National Museum in Canberra), that’s 1.5 times the regular size of a horse’s heart. Because the legend of this horse revolves around his stamina, perseverance, courage and power, for us the large size of his heart furthers this view that these things must all come from the heart.

There are probably many and varied reasons why so many cultures have this view of our heart as being at the core of our being, the driver of our emotions, the source of our feelings, even the origin of our thoughts and actions, but it’s there both in times past and for us today. The heart of the matter is that the way we view the matters of the heart, matter.

An underlying belief in all of this talk, is that what is inside of us determines what comes out, and that is what Paul is writing about in our reading today from 1 Thessalonians 5. The section we have here is right at the end of his first letter to the Christians living in the Greek city of Thessalonica, so Paul is summing everything up his teachings for them. Perhaps that’s why our reading begins with a list of short and sharp commands: Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Keep thanking God because of Jesus Christ. Don’t turn away God’s Spirit. Put everything to the test. Accept what is

good. Don't have anything to do with evil. Ok, got all of that? Let's just write all of those down and then go out and do them, too easy.

Seriously though, let's have a look at the commands here. What do they mean for us? What do you need to change, or do, or stop doing, in order to do these things? Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful always (do you always feel thankful?). Don't have anything to do with evil. As a list it is comprehensive, and it's talking about thoughts, words and actions which come from inside of us. Another way of saying it is that all the things listed here are determined by our attitude; our attitude to ourselves, to other people especially our attitude to God. And where do often talk about our attitude coming from (even though we know they are just sayings)? From the heart. So what, or who, is in our heart determines what comes out in the way we look at the world and our lives, and the things we do or don't do.

As the letter goes on then, it's almost like Paul wrote these words here, then read back over them and thought, 'ooh, those things are right but that is a bit of a discouraging note to finish up on, I better remind them about how and why they can do this', because we then get the encouragement: 'I pray that God, who gives peace, will make you completely holy. And may your spirit, soul, and body be kept healthy and faultless until our Lord Jesus Christ returns.' (*1 Thessalonians 5:23*). Are there words here that really jump out at you? Perhaps 'peace', 'holy', and then, 'may your spirit, soul, and body be kept faultless', that's getting to the heart of the matter. While we might look at the previous list of commands and find them discouraging and daunting, here we have the promise that we don't do any of these things alone. God is not only the One who calls us to do these things, God is also the only One who can enable us to do these things: God is the Caller and the Doer. While we might think Paul has rocks in his head with the things he calls us to do, really he is encouraging us to have Christ in our hearts to enable us to do them.

And then the last verse here really puts a line under it all for us: 'The one who chose you can be trusted, and he will do this.' (*1 Thessalonians 5:24 CEV*) It's about the attitude in Christ-filled

hearts, the attitude we have when in all things we look to God; in thanks, in praise, in trust. The attitude which gives us peace, and which keeps us healthy and faultless, body, mind, and soul. It's about the attitude which is a gift from God when we open ourselves up to Him and for His Spirit to work in our lives.

To replay a very well-worn record at this time of year, Advent is such a busy time for us all. There's present buying, party organising and attending, guests to prepare for or trips to plan and make, work to get finished before a bit of a break for many, Christmas celebrations to organise. Our lives get so filled and cluttered that it's easy for us to feel that the heart of Advent, and leading into that, Christmas, is busyness, stress – both personal and financial, conflict, pressure. All the things really which go against what the Christian meaning of this season is; to prepare for the birth of the Saviour and the hope, peace, joy, and love this brings our world and our lives. There was no room for the Christ-child in the inn, is there room for Him right now in our hearts?

It's good then that we come together to worship, like we are today. It's good that we take time to read the Bible to reflect on the message and hope of Christmas. If you're not doing that already I encourage you to either find a Bible reading plan, or even to just start reading from the beginning of Matthew or Luke's Gospel from the beginning over these next two weeks to enable you to focus on what it is all about. Take time to pray, as Paul tells us; be in communication with God as part of your relationship with Him. Take time to be thankful, in all things. This doesn't mean that we must be thankful for even the bad things which happen to us or others, but that even at these times we can still turn to God and trust in Him. Take time to let your heart be filled with the One who truly is at the heart of this season.

And then, to go back to the beginning of this reading, how does that look? With hearts that we have opened to Jesus to be transformed by Him, we turn from ourselves back to God, trusting in the One who can be trusted. With transformed hearts we can live our lives in joy and thanks, trusting Him to help us with the bad and hard times, and not forgetting to look at the many blessings we have.

With transformed hearts we can look at our relationships, particularly those which aren't so good, looking not at how we would like others to change, but instead seeing what we need to change and asking for God's help with that. With transformed hearts we can look at our priorities, what is most central for us, and to honestly and openly think about what we can do, with God's help, to put Christ in our heart so our attitudes and our lives now reflect Him. And in doing this we can know that hope, that peace, that joy and that love which God, through Jesus, offers to us all.

As we have been going through Advent these last few weeks, we have been thinking about what it means for us and our world that God came into our world, our history, our lives, as one of us. One of the things it means is that we can now have Christ in our hearts, to transform our attitude and our lives to be like Him. This also means that while we know we regularly fail in what God asks us to do, with Christ in our hearts we are also pure and blameless in God's sight. Big hearted, open hearted, generous of heart, these are all good things to be. But the one which is going to truly transform our lives and give us hope, peace and joy we can't find anywhere else, is to open ourselves up to always have Christ in our heart. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

What's In Your Heart?

- If we view the heart, figuratively at least, as being the source of our thoughts, emotions and attitudes, what is in your heart?
- How does what is in you; your priorities, who you trust in, etc, come out in your life?
- Especially in this busy time of Advent, do you risk not having room for Christ in your heart?

Christ In Your Heart

Jesus wants to be in your heart, sometimes we just don't leave room for Him.

- How can you open your heart, and therefore change your attitude, by letting Jesus in?
- Do you need to look at the time, commitment, and priority you give to worship, prayer and Bible reading? If so, what can you do to devote more time to these ways to strengthen your relationship with God?
- Are there things in your life you need to ask God to help you change so that you can better reflect that He is in your heart, eg, how you treat others, who/what you trust in, how you use what God has given you?

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