

ADVENT IV - 2009
SERMON - CHRIST CHURCH PARISH
FATHER JOHN ALTBERG
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ALWAYS BE JOYFUL IN YOUR AFFILIATION WITH GOD... TODAY'S EPISTLE PROVIDES EMPHATIC COUNSEL ON THIS FOURTH AND FINAL OF THE ADVENT SUNDAYS. WORDS OF HOPE AND ENCOURAGEMENT WRITTEN BY A MAN IN PRISON...ST PAUL.

With only four days remaining before Christmas frenzy in our lives may well escalate...in addition, so should our optimism. During these final days of preparation the matter MOST important is meditation upon optimism... despite all else, what optimism are we bringing to ourselves and to others?

St Paul's message to the Church in Philippi was written from prison...one of the Prison Epistles. In this letter he asks people to put aside unimportant matters, petty differences, exhibit a kind and gentle attitude; to concentrate on things that make a difference. Substantive and particularly remarkable counsel from someone in jail!

Today's Epistle was the final Choir Anthem at Lessons and Carols for Advent Sunday just four weeks ago.

The PB translation, while lovely to hear is a bit obscure in its true meaning so let's resort, for a moment to a modern translation and review with the clarity of today's English...
SHOW A GENTLE ATTITUDE TOWARD EVERYONE. THE LORD IS COMING SOON. DON'T WORRY ABOUT ANYTHING, BUT IN YOUR PRAYERS ASK GOD FOR WHAT YOU NEED, ALWAYS ASKING HIM WITH A FAITHFUL HEART. AND GOD'S PEACE WHICH IS FAR BEYOND HUMAN UNDERSTANDING WILL KEEP YOUR HEARTS AND MINDS SAFE IN THE UNION WITH CHRIST JESUS.

An extraordinarily hopeful and optimistic outlook from someone who had little more to expect beyond visits from his jailers every day...yet Paul reports in the opening of the Epistle that he has managed to convince even some of them to give God a chance to work in their lives. It takes about six minutes to read the entire Epistle to the Philippians... only four chapters in length...you'll find it a refreshing message of hope and peace.

During Advent we considered change, hope, peace, quiet and now, optimism... concentrating on what is right...the expectation of good things. That precisely describes the compelling focus of Advent. Cleaning our spiritual and physical closets...putting things in order... preparing for an easier future because we have greater clarity around what is truly important and having disposed of the clutter that frequently obscures our future.

The use of the word OBSCURE is not chosen at random but with careful concentration on the Advent theme of the Collect from the first Sunday and has been used everyday during the season...*GOD GIVE US GRACE THAT WE MAY CAST AWAY THE WORKS OF DARKNESS AND PUT ON THE ARMOR OF LIGHT.* The word obscure comes from the Latin *OBSCURA* meaning "to darken." Clearing things which clutter and obscure our lives really means to get rid of darkness so we can clearly see ahead...illuminated, enlightened, simplified...an easier way, a more productive life of doing things for which we want to be known.

Except to hear more about Christmas and light...it all ties together!!

Meanwhile...about these next few days...if you are completely prepared for Christmas on all fronts, congratulations...I'd like to enlist your help! If you are like most of us, you still have a few unfinished details...no matter what, approach them with optimism and the expectation that it will all work out. Be mindful of St Paul's directive to put things in God's hands and don't try to do it all on your own...have faith that things will work out.

Faith that things will work out is not always easy and we are often tested with difficult situations. The concept is not new but sometimes needs to be called out. Some years ago it was brought starkly to my attention in the writing of contemporary Jesuit theologian Avery Dulles. Cardinal Dulles died just over a year ago leaving a great legacy of scholarship. I will always remember him best for paraphrasing the Epistle to the Hebrews...he said simply, "FAITH IS THE ABSOLUTE EXPECTATION OF THOSE THINGS WE HAVE YET TO SEE"...what an optimistic approach and definition of Advent...!

