

**Listen, Discern the Good** Third Sunday of Advent/B Final Days of Advent December 17, 2017 10:00 AM Is 61:1-2a, 10-11; **1 Thes 5:16-24**; Jn 1:6-8, 19-28 (This is the great work of conscience, to sort through all the good and evil we encounter in life teasing it apart as much as possible.)

**“Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances.”**

This admonition from St. Paul may seem rather inappropriate considering the actual circumstances the early Church lived in. It was riven from within by tensions created by the coming together of Christian Jews and Christian gentiles. It was attacked from without by a theocratic state, the Roman Empire, and by other hostile forces; and yet Paul insists: “Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances.” What he is getting at is this: **circumstances must not dictate our feelings**—circumstances must not dictate our feelings.

If what Jesus did and said is true, then **we have reason to look beyond present sufferings and present dangers to witness the reality of God at work, at work inexorably, planning the salvation of everyone.** Now whether everyone cooperates is not ascertainable, but we know God wants to bring everyone to salvation, to bring everyone to completion; and thus **we need to focus and pay attention to this presence of God.**

Paul goes on: **“Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophetic utterances.”** Now the Spirit is always alive. **The Spirit is always at work. If you’re not aware of the Spirit, this is a good time to awaken.** However the Spirit, although powerful, is not overwhelming. This is one of the mistakes Martin Luther made. He thought grace was overwhelming. No, we are free to close our ears. We are free to close our minds. We are free to be deaf to the prophetic utterances of the Spirit. It will not come if not welcomed. And thus it is very important that we **welcome the Spirit voluntarily into our hearts.** And not just once on the day of our Baptism or the day of our Confirmation, but all the time welcome the Spirit.

Now if you wonder what the Spirit is uttering prophetically, you may not be paying attention, but I am not going to tell you what I think, because **it is very important that you listen to what the Spirit wants to tell you.** There are prophetic utterances all over. They are not necessarily meant for everybody; **you have to listen.** Now a good clue to what the Spirit is saying is just

what society on a whole does not want to hear—that you can be sure of. That’s a clue, just a clue, but it’s a good clue. **It’s what society does not want to hear.**

**Once we welcome the Spirit and listen for God’s message, we need to discern;** that is, we have to **use our reason.** God is not asking for blind faith. God is not waiting for us simply to react to something we think he’s saying, but rather we need to discern. That’s what St. Paul says: **“Test everything; retain what is good.”**

Now most of us have a rather narrow idea of what is good and evil, what is right and wrong. We more or less grow up that way. Paul’s idea is that **good is all around, but it can be mixed with evil.** So the role of the disciple is to tease apart the good from the evil and to keep the good. **This is the great work of conscience, to sort through all the good and evil we encounter in life teasing it apart as much as possible.** This reflects also an image Jesus used of the dragnet. A dragnet is a net that gathers up all kinds of muck from the floor of the sea, and then the fisherman has to go in and take out what is eatable.

**In this process we have to be convinced that there is no position or plan or party that is wholly good and correct or wholly wrong and bad.** There’s good everywhere. It’s hard for us to see the good in the view that opposes our own. At present, this is a secular heresy. **In the secular world everything is polarized.** There is right and left and one is right and the other is wrong. But in truth that’s not quite the way it is. **There’s good and bad in everything.** And according to St. Paul, **the role of the disciple is to stand in the center and to mediate the extremes, reconciling opposites. This is also the mission of a parish in the world.** Can you think of a better way to make ready the way of the Lord?