

Final Message at St Paul's

This week as I prepared I was genuinely lost for words.
How do you close off 11 years of ministry?
When we came here I was still in my 30's with 3 children 6 and under.
Now I'm not in my 30's...

Of course it's a reminder that's not about me...
And as the people of God we go to God's word.

So just a really a short, punchy passage this morning.
In 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 16 – 18 Paul says:

“Always be joyful.
Never stop praying.
Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.”

As he closes out this particular letter these are some encouragements from Paul.
And in some way they're simple reminders about the shape of the Christian life,
of what it means to keep following Jesus.

“Keep being joyful.”

Joy is actually one of those words that is actually quite hard to pin down and define.

Joy is related to happiness but is not exactly the same.

For example, as rugby league fan, I'm happy when the Warriors win; I'm not so happy when they lose by 60-odd points.

I was ecstatic when the All Blacks beat the Irish in the RWC quarter final.
I was not so happy two weeks later...

There is joy that is a fruit of the Holy Spirit; an attribute of a life given over to the Spirit of God.

It can be a response to an unexpected good.

There is joy that is pure gift.

So as I have done over the last 11 years here's a question to mull over and talk about:

“What are the marks of a joyful person?”

It's marked by a lightness of spirit.

People who are joyful live lightly.

It's not the absence of sadness and yet they're encumbered by bitterness or resentment.

Alongside that is the ability to not take yourself too seriously.

After his final sermon a pastor farewelled the congregation at the door for the last time. As she approached the door one woman in particular just absolutely lost it! She burst into tears and just was weeping.

So the pastor says to her, "It's going to be all right. I'm sure the next person will be great!"

To which the woman responded, "That's what they said last time!"

Joy is ultimately found in God.

You know, joy is the exuberance and lightness of spirit found in Christ.

With joyful people there is a genuine levity they carry about with them.

There is a lightness in the step.

It's *enjoyment* of who God is and what he has done and what he is doing.

It's expressed in prayer and song and in conversations.

So what is the opposite of joy?

It's not actually sadness or sorrow.

I think it's being burdened; encumbered. Weighed down.

You're carrying stuff and it's sucking the life out of you.

"How do you know if you're burdened?"

- You don't sleep well.

You may wake up in the middle of the night thinking about an issue or issues or it may even invade your dreams.

- Another: you feel it's weight almost physically.

A weight on you mind becomes like a weight on your body.

The shoulders slump.

So you feel it's weight.. and it also takes your focus.

There are such things as tension headaches

- Here's one and I want you to hear this: you sigh a lot.

sigh

We all sigh at times but when you're burdened it's constant.

It saps the joy out of your life.

Here there is a reminder too that this church and the Church is Jesus Christ's church – it's Christ's church.

It's never been my church and it's not yours either.

Christ alone is the Head of His Church.

The church isn't something we can take on as a burden as if the success or failure rests solely on us.

You may have attended here all your life and served in different capacities but it's still not your church.

Yes, we have time, talents and treasure to offer.

We are part of His Body and have gifts to offer in His service.

Jesus said I will build my Church.

And not only is it Christ's church and also joining in with His ministry – we are commissioned with Christ.

Leadership matters, but Christ alone is our Shepherd

Which is good news!

God is faithful.

In 2026 it will be 150 years since the establishment of St Paul's in Katikati.

God has been faithful and will continue to be faithful to St Paul's.

So my confession - my verbal confession - is often, "Lord Jesus, this is your church. I place it again in your hands."

So keep an eye on your burdens so that you may live joyfully.

And if you sense there are burdens, hear the words of Jesus:

²⁸ "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

"Keep on praying"

There is private prayer and is corporate prayer.

And there's all sorts of ways of praying.

At the core though is this idea that prayer isn't just some religious ritual where you go through the motions.

A friend of mine was asked in an interview how he prays.

He replied, "I get naked".

He didn't mean literally (as far as I'm aware....)

What he meant is that in prayer – personal private prayer – we drop all pretence. We bare our hearts and souls before him.

It's a reminder that prayer not just something we do – and I've said something I've said many times before – it's not just something we do, it's Someone we talk to.

The purpose of prayer is to nurture and cultivate a faithful, loving, personal relationship with your Creator.

Tender, intimate communion.

There's also those times when we pray for others in front of other, which can be fraught.

The first time I ever prayed out loud in a group setting I was so, so nervous. I didn't come from a church background, praying wasn't part of my upbringing and I was painfully shy.

It was in a small prayer meeting and when I prayed I'm sure my voice was shaky.

But in God's grace I did it.

I think the challenge of praying with others is self-consciousness.

A pastor writes:

I loved being a pastor except for having to pray publicly.

That never came easily to me.

In the Baptist Church, it was an unwritten law that ministers should never read their prayers. Generally speaking, there was a sense that to read prayers was somehow unspiritual.

I wasn't sure that if I ever did so, someone would be apt to mumble, "Oh, he reads his prayers! Did you notice? He reads his prayers!"

This meant that I had to make up the pastoral prayers right there, on the spot.

I found it hard to connect spiritually and emotionally with Jesus and to be aware of the listening people in the congregation at the same time. There were times when I would forget the congregation and just lose myself in intensive connectedness with God, and often at such times, my street language would surface.

One Sunday, on the way out of church, a woman said to me, “Reverend, do you know how many grammatical errors you made in the prayer this morning?”

Before I could catch myself, I shot back, “I wasn’t talking to you anyway!”

In spite of the challenges, keep on praying.

Keep on praying means keep the communication lines open.

Keep that tender, intimate communion with Jesus.

Keep praying for others.

Then Paul says:

“Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you who belong to Christ Jesus.”

So lastly, I want to say “Thank you.”

Thankfulness is one of the marks of the Christian life.

This sense that we not alone in the universe, that there is a God who cares for us, who walks with us and loves to give good gifts.

I know that the times when I’ve had ingratitude, there has been a sharp rebuke from the Lord one way or another about and that’s been for my good.

So I have tried to cultivate thankfulness in my own life.

I think when thankfulness dries up or ingratitude rears its head, it’s a red flag.

It’s a red flag in the wider church. I mean it’s a recipe for distrust and petty squabbles that often occur.

It’s a red flag for our own personal lives because we don’t recognise that God is good and he’s good to us.

The Apostle Paul often – *often* – gives thanks to God and when he does it is often for and to people.

Many of his letters begin with, “I give thanks to God for you...”

(Romans 1:8, 1 Corinthians 1:4; Ephesians 1:15 – 16; Philippians 1:3; Colossians 1:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:3).

So...

Thank you all for the years of care and concern shown to us as a family.

Thank you for the time invested in us.

Thanks for journeying through the ups and downs.

Thanks for the many prayers.

Thank you to all who have shared in leadership in one form or another over the last 11 years. There is a wealth of collective wisdom here.

Thank you for holding fast to the gospel.

Thank you to my long term friends who have I've journeyed with for such a long time now.

Thank you to Tayla, Conrad and Pippa for walking the journey too.

Thank you to Kay – an incredible, beautiful, intelligent caring woman who has been such an encouragement to me.

Most of all thanks and praise to the Lord Jesus, who is awesome.
In the 30+ years of walking with Him, He's been faithful and good and amazing to us

So I want to leave with song that captures so much of who he is.

"How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dsg9uNJ8ee4>

"Jesus! my Shepherd, Brother, Friend,
My Prophet, Priest, and King;
My Lord, my Life, my Way, my End,
Accept the praise I bring."