

Faith is a gift

Good morning to you all. I have brought along this present, gift-wrapped of course, because that is the loving way to present a gift. The gift-wrapping will generate some level of excitement and mystery. What could possibly be inside?

If I was to hand this gift-wrapped present to you, no doubt, you would be looking forward to opening it as soon as possible to discover the surprise within. It's a most natural thing to open a gift which someone presented to us. Children demonstrate this perfectly well. Just watch a child during a birthday party and witness the eagerness as the child opens a present.

Today, some of our Bible readings were from Saint Paul's letter to the Galatians. In these letters Paul is alerting the Christians, living in that region, to the precious gifts that God has on offer. These are spiritual gifts and Paul clearly describes them with these words, ...love, patience, kindness, self-control and many more. I suggest to you that these precious gifts from God, which are also offered to you and me, these gifts often remain unwrapped. As a result sinful behaviour continues to dominate this person's life. Here is one reason that leads me to that conclusion.

I once was asked to provide counselling to a young man, who had difficulty with important relationships. Once a month we would spend an hour in my office at the courthouse and we talked about some of these things that seemed to cause problems in his private life. At the end of our first session I asked him to write on a piece of paper these words.

"I am patient" and "I am kind."

He didn't know that these words were from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13, words that instruct Christians on how to live their lives. We are very familiar with these words, of course, because we hear them on a regular basis on Sunday and therefore know them like this...."love is patient and love is kind."

The young man left my office, promise to do what I'd ask him, and one month later he returned for his second session. For one entire month, every day, three times a day, he spoke those words from the letter to the Corinthians.

"I am patient" and "I am kind."

Note, I did not request of him to say.... "love is patient" and "love is kind." Instead I presented these words to him in such a way that this young man took ownership of these words. I was seeking to prove a point. I unwrapped the gift for him and asked him to accept these words. One month later, by now this young man had repeated these words ninety times, I ask him what impact this had on his life.

He looked at me. Tears filled his eyes and said.

"I've never realized how impatient and how unkind I was."

“Every day I said to myself.. “I am patient” and “I am kind. In fact, I put these words on my smart-phone and three times a day the phone would alert me and I would read those words and often discover I was about to get very upset about someone or something and these words would rescue me. These words rescued me a few times during the month, saved me from damaging a few of my relationships. It helped me to recognise that I am not patient and kind, but that I can be patient and kind if I work on myself. During later sessions the young man stated how other people noticed the change that had taken place, commented favourably on his kindness and patience. The behaviour of this young man was changed positively during the next six months due to these two verses and relationship issues were healed. This, I believe, was the result of unwrapping the gift that God offers to each one of us and claiming these words for ourselves. These spiritual gifts do indeed set us free, to be vessels of love, as we read today in the letter to the Galatians.

Being a professional photographer I am trained in the management of light. The word photography has its origin from the Greek language, “photos” meaning “light.” In the gospel of John we read that “God is light.” Now, if we were to step outside into the sunlight, our body would be illuminated on one side, but the other half would be rendered in shade. That’s precisely how the Word of God functions. It illuminates our mind, just as the words from the letter to the Corinthians illuminated this young man, who had come into my office for help.

Every one of us has a capacity to reflect God’s light in this world, by living according to the illuminating Word of God. However, despite our best efforts, we will always cast a shadow. This shadow reminds us that God is light and our sinful nature will accompany us through the rest of our life. And that is why Jesus, the light of the world, came to save us. During the coming week I encourage you to say to yourself these words from the letter to the Corinthians and observe for yourself what will happen. The Word of God is a precious gift to you, a gift to bless you, and me, and the world we live in.

And now a few words for those who are carrying heavy burdens for one reason or another. One my neighbours is a doctor of medicine, but not your usual type of doctor. He does not practice in a hospital or a doctor’s surgery; rather, he is a University lecturer, teaching medical students and Paramedics. We often have a neighbourly chat along the fence line, mainly about the weather. He is a pretty fit person and on this day our conversation touched on the various ways of keeping fit. During this neighbourly talk he introduced me to the “Golgi Tendon Reflex.” Mr. Golgi discovered it and here is a very simply explanation of the Golgi Tendon Reflex. When our body is subjected to excessive weight, the kind of weight that would be harmful to our body, our muscles and tendons send alarm signals to the brain. As a result, instead of the muscles tensing up to carry this heavy load, the complete

opposite takes place. The muscles and tendons relax and this protects the body from serious damage.

You know, God has given us that ability too. When the weight of the world is becoming too heavy to carry, and there is a real risk of damage to your body, that's when God offers to you and me this precious gift, named "Faith."

The world is filled with people who carry incredible heavy loads which provides them with little sleep by night and hardly any peace during the day. Many of these people will reach out to substances that promise relief, substances such as alcohol and drugs, but these offer no relief, merely dependency. Only God can set us free, as our text for today reminds us yet again.

The gift of faith protects our mind and heart. When the weight of the world is too much for us, faith comes to the rescue. Faith doesn't demand answers. Faith can live with the uncertainty of tomorrow, because our problems are in the best hands, in God's hands. Faith and trust in God protects our mind and heart. The weight of the world is unable to crush us, unable to damage us. This faith in God provides peace for our souls, a deep inner knowing that we are loved by God.

So, I encourage you today, for this coming week, please open God's precious gifts, because God seeks to bless you with them. Here is a Bible verse that I recommend to you for the coming week, like medicine to be taken three times a day, breakfast, lunch and dinner. Write this verse on a piece of paper. Read it aloud three times a day for the next week and notice the difference God's Holy Spirit will make to your life.

This verse can be found in the gospel of Luke. We are told that ten lepers had been healed by Jesus, but only one leper returned to thank him for this amazing kindness. The other nine lepers simply walked away. I suggest to you that there is an element of the single, grateful leper present in you and me. I pose to you this question.

Are we not here most Sunday's to thank God for what He has done for us?

Please note the response from Jesus to the grateful leper, found in Luke 17:19

"Go and rise; your faith has made you well."

Faith in God, through Jesus Christ, is the most precious gift you and I can receive. Treasure these words as you journey through the coming week.

...and may the peace of God, which transcends all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. Amen