

Trinity 22 (HC-Epistle) (2018)

In the spring of 2015, I received word that the church in which I grew up was closing its doors.

The demographics of the neighbourhood around the church had changed. Many longstanding members had moved to outlying areas, and those who continued to drive in were getting older and fewer.

In response, rather than go out with a whimper, the decision was made to go out with a bang . . . to have one last service at which all the ‘old folks’ were invited back.

Well, I ‘be’ one of those ‘old folks’ and was glad to receive an invitation and to be able to go. It was bitter-sweet, but a very soulful experience.

Around 400 turned up, with a potluck following the service. In the South, you have to have fried chicken to make any day complete!

Going back to the service, I cannot tell you how moving it was to go into that church and sit in the pew where my family had sat all those years before. I found my eyes getting moist frequently throughout the service.

It was equally moving after the service to walk through the various Sunday School classrooms. Each one brought back a memory, most of which involved people.

In one, in the Primary Department, I saw Mrs. Scifres, an English war bride (her husband was our plumber) sitting in a chair reading Bible stories to us children.

In another, I saw Mrs. Williams showing us how to press coloured leaves between two pieces of wax paper with the iron she had brought from home.

In another, I saw Ann Preston, the minister’s wife, circa 1970, leading a Sunday School assembly program. The podium behind which she stood was still in the room.

Outside, under a porte-cochere I saw Mr. Massey, who each year would take off a week from work to help at Vacation Bible School. I saw him helping us boys cut out bread boards for mother with a power saw.

On and on I could go; there was no nook or cranny in that church that did not bring back memories.

In room after room, I saw the faces of people who had modelled the Christian faith and in so doing had helped to form me.

Some were present in the service that day, though a number had departed to be with the Lord.

When I got back to Blue Ridge, I told my sister about this experience. What she said in response was very telling:

“You know church was our second home. Those people were our family.” It was so.

And, to adapt the opening line of today’s Epistle: **“I give thanks for them upon every remembrance.”**

The same is true when I look back over 30 years during my time as Rector of this church.

In the community room of the old Blue Ridge City Hall, where we met for our first eight years of life, I see Frank and Rose Brass coming early on a Sunday morning and, more often than not, Frank moping the floor before we set up chairs. (It was usually sticky with spilled Coca-Cola.)

I see Preble and Isabell Staver, whose dog Cuppa, at least by some accounts, stood for praise, sat for instruction and knelled for prayer when she attended service with them.

I see the Mundys, the Bryants, the Hedges, Ann and Tick Johnson . . .

I see Clair Bewes coming in with an arm-load of cut flowers from her garden, taking them into the kitchen where she would chop off the stems before putting them into vases and placing them on the make-shift altar – the judge’s bench covered with a tapestry.

I give thanks for every remembrance of these faithful, hardy souls.

The same applies to those who, since 1995, have gathered in this space.

I can see their faces, feel their embraces, hear their voices, and get the warmest feeling when I think of them.

I hope you can do the same.

*Friends on earth, and friends above;
For all gentle thoughts and mild:
Christ, our God, to Thee we raise
This our Sacrifice of Praise.*

. . . says the hymn writer.

Let me urge you to remember and be intentional about it?

As you prepare and are coming to the Lord's Table this morning, let the faces of Christian friends pass before your eyes.

For those who are departed in the Lord, remember that only a thin veil separates them from us. We are part of one great fellowship of love. We believe in the "communion of saints."

"Therefore with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven," we say in our Communion service.

It is especially appropriate that we do this today as we move towards All Saints' Day. I hope you can be at Thursday's noonday service.

But, why should we remember Christian friends?

Well, we find our answer in this morning's Epistle.

First, because remembering leads to **worship**. Yes, worship. For you see, as we think of dear Christian friends, both living and dead, we are moved to look up and thank God for them and their fellowship.

Fellowship, by the way, involves more than just hanging out with each other at the coffee hour. It (*koinonia* in the Greek) means working along side others at a common task. Our task is proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Secondly, we ought to remember Christian friends because remembering produces **joy**. Paul puts it this way: **“Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy.”**

Paul could have used some joy at this point in his life. He was in prison and did not know if was going to get out by release or by death.

In his case, joy came from not only remembering the Philippians’ friendship in the past, but from remembering their present support. Not only were they praying for him; they were sending monetary gifts.

I want to suggest, whatever the circumstance, remember old and dear friends brings joy to the heart.

Thirdly and finally, remembering friends issues into **prayer**.

I am thinking now in particular of those who are alive. You pray for their safety, their health and spiritual growth.

This is what we find Paul doing for his dear friends in Philippi.

He wants to see them moving forward . . . that their love for one another might grow more and more.

And, secondly, that they might “approve those things that are excellent”.

What a lovely phrase and thought that is. I think what he is saying is this:

“I want you to choose those things that lead to life to the full, the abundant life that only God can give.” ///

So, in recapitulation, according to Paul, remembering produces three positive effects: **worship, joy and prayer**.

That is why I am asking you to take on this exercise this morning. It’s good for the soul and good for the health of the Church.

If someone later on today asks you: “What did the preacher preach on?” Say: “Holy Remembrance” and then go on to explain what that means. ///

“I give thanks upon every remembrance of you.” I cannot help but get a warm feeling when I hear those words . . . when I remember friend past /// but also when I remember *you*.