

Sunday 11th October
Sermon by Reverend Peter Lyth

A personal prayer

I do not always know who I am or what I want, Lord. I am sometimes happy in my skin and sometimes I just want to leave it all behind. Sometimes I want to be 'out there' and noticed and other times I want to be alone and obscure. Sometimes, Lord, my tears are of joy and sometimes of sorrow and anguish. But always, Lord, you know my innermost thoughts, even those I do not understand myself – help me to rest always in you. **Amen**

Read Philippians 4: 1-9

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For the last couple of weeks, the Lectionary reading from the epistles has been from Paul's letter to the Philippians. A couple of weeks ago, it featured an early hymn that declared the belief of the early church, last week Paul spoke of his personal transformation as he left behind the values that he had worked hard for in order to know Christ.

But, like many of Paul's letters, it was written to a particular church, a group of real people who were facing issues in their day-to-day lives. So what was this church in Philippi like?

Philippi is in what is now known as Northern Macedonia and is now a UNESCO world heritage site. It was originally a Greek city but was re-founded by the Romans in 42 BC after the battle of Philippi. In common with other places with a similar heritage, it had been remodelled in a Roman style, the work having been completed not long before the letter was written in 60CE.

For many people living in cities in the Roman era, life was hard. The infant mortality rate was about 50% for children under 10 and generally the life expectancy was 25-30 years old. Some people survived longer – even to 60 years but these were the exception. This also led to large numbers of widows and orphans. Not only that, but, in order to maintain the population, a high birth rate was needed. Women generally married in their teens and men in their early twenties. The youth of the mothers led to many complications and death in childbirth, as did dubious hygiene and medical practices. In addition, there were many deformities and disabilities in the population, some congenital, others acquired.

This seems a gloomy picture but there were more positive things too. This was a city where women could sometimes progress socially and become economically active, even sometimes leading households.

It is unlikely that, by 50 CE, the time of Paul's first visit to the city, the life, death and resurrection of Christ had not been heard of, given that Philippi was on the trade routes.

However, we can attribute Paul with drawing those early believers together into a community that we can regard as a church.

This letter attributed to Paul is probably, according to many scholars, an amalgamation of three separate letters. However, since the canon of scripture has been formed, it has always existed as one unified work. By the time the letter had been written, Paul had made several visits, making it likely that the work was most likely around 60AD. Letters of this type were usually read aloud to the congregation as many would be illiterate.

One other point which I referred to earlier was the status of women. This is brought into sharp relief here as two women are specifically mentioned as co-workers. This is significant as we tend to regard church leadership at that time as being largely the province of men. The two women feature in our reading today.

This reading is taken from the last chapter of the letter and is really a summing up of some of the themes of the letter. So Paul gives his audience some instructions that will stand them in good stead as they continue to witness to Christ and serve him in the city.

The first is the instruction to “stand firm in the Lord”. Probably this is the main theme of the letter as a whole. By this stage, Paul was in prison and unable to encourage them in person. He was obviously concerned that they would struggle to resist external pressures. There would be many of these, as are shown in Paul’s other letters such as persecution, false teachings and the proliferation of other religions. They should instead be steadfast, something that Paul mentions at no less than four points in the letter. Nothing should undermine the faith that sustains them.

But one of the things that so often threatens the faith of a community is lack of unity. And this is the subject of Paul’s second exhortation. He has already told them to be “of the same mind” and “to think of each other’s interests”. But there is division in the ranks. It becomes personal as two people, women as it happens, are named. We don’t know much about Euodia and Syntyche apart from the fact that they worked for the Gospel and that they disagreed in some way. The fact that they are named suggests that they were prominent in the church, here being an example of where women were in leadership roles. An unnamed leader is charged with getting them to see eye-to-eye. There are various theories as to he/she was, but there is no clear answer. What is clear however, is that disagreements that are public and lead to disunity are an unwelcome distraction and mean that Christ cannot be served effectively. It is a matter that Paul picks up in other letters and it is clearly something that he took very seriously.

The third thing that Paul tells them is that they should carry on following Christ, using Paul as an example. He is one that can be imitated in his service to the risen Lord. Whether it is his continued faithfulness in spite of his imprisonment, or whether it’s the fact that he

renounced his past or that he was single minded in his pursuit of citizenship of the kingdom of heaven, all these were – and indeed are- traits that are exemplary in a follower of Christ.

Alongside these, Paul tells his church to embrace the ideas that the members of the church, rather than worrying, bring their concerns in prayer to God whilst doing so with a thankful heart. There is also a sense that God is close, bringing his peace with him. We are often sold the idea of “peace of mind” with regard to insurance policies and extended warranties – here is a reassurance that relying on God rather than being anxious is a promise for those who know that God is close. And, as Paul tells his readers to “rejoice in the Lord always” we can but respond with joy to the thought that we can have the peace of God in our hearts and minds.

That is the peace that we share in times of trouble as well as peace and prosperity. It is the assurance that God is with us – an assurance that Paul had and that we can share.

Prayers of intercession

O God, we come to pray not for ourselves, but for each other – for those we know and those we don't, for situations we understand and for those that confound us.

The news tells us of trauma and heartache across the world and we try to grasp the intensity of it all.

Bless, O Lord, all involved in the hurting and the healing.

We hear of death and dying, of grieving and weeping...

We hear of pain, scarring and disfigurement...

We hear of anguish and confusion...

We hear of those in need of help, and those who struggle to find it...

We hear of the grieving and the sorrowful...

We hear of the lost and the alone...

And we know, Lord, there are myriad others known only to you.

Bless them all in their hurting and their healing. **Amen**

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