

PHILIPPIANS

UNITY & JOY FOR THE SAKE OF THE GOSPEL

Paul's letter to the young Church at Philippi is a personal favourite, mainly because the positivity that flows through it fits with my 'glass always being half full' mentality.

Also, Paul's delivery is one very much of a personal letter to dear and trusted friends. It is full of encouragement and guidance, underwritten with Joy.

As usual Paul wants to teach about lifestyle about perseverance and to warn against false teaching, but it's the manner in which he does it that I find most appealing.

Philippians is packed full of wonderful one-liners, words and phrases that we can memorize and repeat to ourselves when the going gets tough.

Prayer, praise and thanksgiving are all given priority. Paul encourages the Church towards a better way of living;

- Self-humbling
- Pressing on towards the Goal
- Not being anxious
- Having the ability to do all things

What is also clear within this letter is that Paul is very thankful and full of JOY for what they are doing and how they are growing. (Joy and rejoice between them are used 16 times)

He is also clear to encourage UNITY within the Church. Unity can be defined as "having the absence of division". IT IS NOT "UNIFORMITY".

Paul wants the Church to know, appreciate and understand that what God wants is a unity of spirit and purpose, where hearts and minds are seeking the same goal, that of spreading the good news of Jesus.

To help us to break down the letter in manageable size portions we will look over the next 7 Holy Communion services at Philippians as follows;

1. The joyful Servant of Christ (1:1-11)
2. The optimistic prisoner (1:12-30)
3. The humble saviour (2:1-18)
4. Faithful Servants (2:19-30)
5. The persevering idealist (3:1-21)
6. The reassuring pastor (4:1-9)
7. The grateful encourager (4:10-23)

Our hope and our prayer is that as a Church we too are filled with the joy, praise, grace and peace that Paul wanted for this young but growing and important Church in the region.

THE JOYFUL SERVANT OF CHRIST

Pope Francis told the young inmates during the mass held in the Casal del Marmo juvenile correctional facility on the outskirts of Rome when he washed the feet of 12 inmates (including 2 young women one of whom was Muslim).

"This is a symbol, it is a sign. Washing your feet means I am at your service, Help one another. This is what Jesus teaches us. This is what I do. And I do it with my heart."

A Joyful Servant

"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons."

What a beautiful way to start a letter – setting the tone right from the beginning. Paul makes sure firstly; that the Church understands and appreciates his position as a servant of Christ - despite his afflictions and difficult circumstances his only purpose in life is to proclaim the Gospel.

He starts most of his letters with "Paul, an apostle of Christ." – to establish his authority as a messenger of the Gospel, often because his credibility had been challenged.

But not here – here we have real 'relationship', they are united in hope and joy in the service of Christ Jesus

Paul also wants to confirm that his Gospel message is to all.

"....all God's holy people...together with the overseers and deacons."

Not .."the leaders, overseers, deacons, those with responsibility.. oh and the rest of you?"

Inclusive – for all God's people.

Remember, this Church is not made up of Jews but of converted Gentiles. They have no synagogue history, no Jewish rituals or symbolism to fall back on. The Church has been born and has grown through a love of Christ and through the joy that salvation has brought to their hearts and lives.

"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.."

Now – I don't always feel like a 'joyful servant', quite often I would rather play Golf or stay in bed. I am sure that at times Paul also felt like that. Certainly when you read some of his other letters you feel the frustration and disappointment of their lack of understanding, faith and trust in God.

But I want joy in my heart, I want praise to be on my lips at all times and I want prayer to be at the centre of everything I do and say.

Partnership in the Gospel – much more than just fellowship.

Paul refers to the Church as his partners.

Paul writes from prison, probably house arrest in Rome – he is free to write and preach the gospel, but he was also probably totally dependent upon gifts of food and money to survive.

Here we have a Church in a different country raising money and sending one of their own on a long a dangerous journey to deliver the gift (Epaphroditus)– this speaks volumes for the esteem and love in which Paul was held.

The Philippian Church wanted to share in his ministry not only through fellowship but also by providing practical and financial support.

In Paul's world 'partnership' had business connotations – the Church in Philippi and he were in this together.

This is a partnership in the gospel business and in the grace business.

He wants to stress that they are ALL APOSTLES and ALL SERVANTS.

They all have a purpose, all have a role and all have a part to play – just like us here in Salford Priors.

The work of grace that God has started...

Paul recognizes that their life changing experience isn't a flash in the pan, no, the Gospel message of Jesus has changed their hearts and minds, and Paul rejoices in that certainty;

“..being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus”

Their lives have been changed by understanding and appreciating the undeserved grace of God through the love of Christ Jesus and his ultimate sacrifice.

But God continues to work in their hearts as he does ours – to develop our understanding and appreciation of this incredible grace (undeserved favour).

It is a journey that they are on, a daily journey as they live their lives and grow in faith. Just like us.

This letter to the Philippians reflects on this journey of faith and positively encourages and challenges the Church in their understanding of God's grace for them.

Hopefully it will also encourage us in the same way?

The more we understand of Grace, the more we will appreciate what it means to have a “servant heart”.

Pauls' prayer for the Church

The last section of this first part of this letter, Paul writes a beautiful prayer for the Church. *v 9-11 "This is my prayer:- that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God"*

This is a prayer for us all.

Your love may abound in knowledge and depth of insight.....

For Paul, Love is not only demonstrated in emotion or affection it is also to do with knowledge and wisdom.

We can't separate the 'heart' from the 'head' – if Christian love is to be genuine – true love for one another, true love for God it has to work its way out in a knowledge and wisdom which is much more than pure theory.

This knowledge is a deep insight into the way God's world is – and that can only come through relationship with him and through giving ourselves wholeheartedly to loving and serving God through Jesus.

Your love should discern.....

Often we read in Paul's letters, clear guidance and even rebuke for their actions, the false teaching they have been hearing and sometimes believing.

But here Paul gently guides them by encouraging them to focus on Jesus and in doing so their love will discern what is right and wrong – it will become their moral compass.

The world is often grey – and it is difficult for us to discern the right path to take – so many mixed messages so many choices, how do we get things right.

Filled with the righteousness that comes through Christ Jesus.....

Sometimes the word 'righteousness' doesn't help us to understand what is meant here. It is 'right living' and it is also God's own faithfulness and sometimes it is about being part of God's family and God's purpose.

"Membership has its privileges!"

Paul may be in prison, he may be hundreds of miles away and he will undoubtedly have a whole heap of concerns and fears for the future. Yet somehow throughout this beautiful letter he demonstrates such a deep inner joy and peace, hope and praise that we should all learn something from.

"It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus."

I hope and pray that we can learn so much from this letter. It will challenge us, but hopefully it will inspire us too.