

Philippians 2 v 19 - 30 - SERVANTHOOD

Paul's letter to the Philippians is of huge importance to all Christians who down the ages face difficult times, for we all know in life 'There are days – and there are days!'

Days to remember, days to celebrate and days to forget!

Good ones might include anniversaries – birthdays etc.

Today we remember Trinity Sunday – which seeks to make sense of God being three in one and yet one in three!

The church also celebrates many special days, from the solemn to the peculiar – one that comes to mind was that of 'Merry Monday,' particularly noticeable by a hangover on Shrove Tuesday as they used consumed vast amounts of alcohol before Lent began.

Rather more solemn is 'Good Friday' which marked the crucifixion of Christ, because of this in Ireland Fridays became associated with 'bad luck' and thus they passed a directive that no ships be launched on a Friday from Irish shipyards!

We have all had bad days! Many years ago I joined the Police force, at that time we were told of the entrance paper which had a question which went like this – 'You are standing on the High Street corner in your uniform when the alarm bells sound from the bank opposite, out from the door charge some bank robbers with shot guns in their hands; one of them trips and discharges the firearm, this makes all the shoppers run for their lives, unfortunately in the panick a mother pushing her pram gets knocked over and her pram runs out of control into the road. A bus swerves to avoid a collision and crashes instead into a bus shelter, it is not certain who is injured but the crashed bus is a mess, this causes all the traffic to stop and the bank robbers who had jumped into their get away car are now stuck in the traffic.'

The question was – What would you do first? Someone answered, 'take off my Police tunic and mingle with the crowd!'

One thing St Paul could not be accused of would be trying to escape from the situation facing him – our reading today gives us a glimpse of how Paul thinks and responds to what he sees as a crisis.

RECAP – The church in Philippi is relatively a young church, there has been a Jewish community in the community prior to the Christian Mission of Paul. It has a strong historical place in the Roman Empire which has seen it granted special privileges (it is a tax haven!). Its people were proud and the mixture of Greek – Roman culture was generally hostile to Monotheism and thus Christianity. And so this fledgling Christian church in Philippi stands fairly isolated.

ANXIOUS PAUL

In Chapter One we see Paul anxiety for these young Christians, he is concerned for the strength for their faith, he always remembers them in his prayers giving thanks for them, their good works and for their concern for himself.

Paul, who is under arrest and is imprisoned seeks to encourage them, he is concerned that they may be discouraged by his own sufferings. In his letter, he implores them to remain steadfast in their faith, to grow in their insight, to be disciples who think and act like Christ until the day comes when he returns!

Paul has a special place in his heart for this church, but he sees ahead something that increases his anxiety, a time is coming when the doctrines of the church will be challenged and disunity may cause them to give up following Christ.

Without trying to chastise them, Paul tries to justify why he has such feelings for them and so in Chapter Two Paul begins with words of guidance 'Be like minded with Christ.' THEN comes the BIG ASK! As you work out how to be a faithful Christian 'Do everything without complaining or arguing.'

NOW, if churches could follow Paul's guidance we wouldn't hear our critics accusing us of hypocrisy all the time. Much of time when churches fall out among themselves it is because they have failed to see the bigger picture instead they have become focussed on themselves, on their own situation and needs and fail to see what Christ would ask of them.

Sometimes it means us giving up strongly held opinions, being less hasty to judge, none of us have been made perfect and we need to grow in grace. Underlying Paul's anxiety is the thought that the church of Philippi will judge him, perhaps harshly for what he has to say to them.

FAITHFUL PAUL

Paul is clearly frustrated by his captivity, his own situation is worsening, yet despite pending danger his thoughts are not focused on himself but upon the needs of the church in Philippi. They are a young church and they have a lot to learn!

If he cannot go in person, Paul chooses to send Timothy, but even in this Paul's hopes are frustrated. Verse 19, 'I hope in the power of the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you very soon.' Paul is emphasising the strength of his choice and the need for Timothy to go to Philippi. Just in case the church misunderstands the need for any leader to join them or give them oversight, Paul cites how Timothy must be viewed.

In the verses following, Paul says there is no-one like him, Timothy's qualities are that of Paul, he is so like him in that nothing will deflect Timothy from putting Christ first in his life. Timothy is not only faithful, he is a SELFLESS SERVANT, he is willing to go where Christ calls him. Undoubtedly Paul considered other leaders whom he could have sent BUT they put their own interests first, they, like much of the world looked out for themselves.

As disciples, there will be times when there is a need for personal self-sacrifice if we are to be true servants of the kingdom of God, (metaphorically speaking, we cannot simply take off our tunics and mingle with the crowd when it suits us).

Here in this country one of the few remaining challenges to confront our Christian courage can be found during Christian Aid Week. Many find it difficult to knock doors and collect much needed money to help the poor of this world.

CONFIDENT PAUL

Timothy is Paul's first choice and he commissions him to go to the church in Philippi in his place, but confident though he is of his decision to send help and even that one day he will be released to visit them, he also sees the need to send Epaphroditus ahead of Timothy.

NOW Paul addresses another essential quality of faithful discipleship, we hear of the great service Epaphroditus made to the work of the kingdom in his bringing the offering collected by the rich Philippian church to help Paul and the wider church. In doing so he fell ill and nearly died, he **SUFFERED** greatly for the Gospel and Paul sees how important it is for him now to rest and yet even then he can serve God.

Alas, the return of Epaphroditus might be misunderstood and cause conflict (how sensitive we are!), for Epaphroditus was seen as part of the gift to Paul, he was meant to stay to help in his work whilst in prison, to send him home might be seen as failure on his part.

Paul cannot stress enough that he should be respected, he has been a blessing to the work of God and thus a blessing to Paul, he almost died in that service.

Again, Paul is urging this young church to see the bigger picture and become a church filled with grace to accept that God's plan may not always be what we plan for ourselves.

CONCLUSION

Though Paul is **ANXIOUS** he also reveals his **CONFIDENCE** which is borne out of his own **FAITHFULNESS** as a disciple of Christ, one who constantly looks out for the interests of Christ in all situations, that in all he does it is God that is glorified.

We probably wouldn't have had the New Testament Letter's if it were not for the conflict within the young Christian churches then and in the world around them. Sadly nothing changes, in Paul's time conflicts were numerous, doctrines were challenged and persecution ever present.

We may ask ourselves, 'Is it any different today?' This week saw our country witnessed a brutal murder by extremists whose own faith clashes with the Christian values held by the West. Attacks on our faith, our unity and our ability to remain faithful to Christ will come in many guises – With each assault, we have to choose how to respond.

At the beginning of the sermon, I said there are days, and there are days! The hypothetical question asked of a police officer highlights how **MAKING** the right choices as a Christian not only has consequences for ourselves but also for the well being of the Kingdom of God.

Faced with the challenges to the church in our own time, Paul has but one answer, it is human nature to look out for ones-self, but for Christians in every church, throughout all time we should look to Jesus, his interests – ask yourselves, 'What would Jesus do,' in any given situation and you will have the answer to what you must do to become good and faithful servants of the Lord.