

The Reassuring Pastor – Philippians Ch.4 verses 1-9

Sermon preached by Joyce Lewis at St Mathew's on 23rd June 2013

In December last year we recorded a programme made by David Suchet called "In the steps of St Paul". It was not only interesting but so lovely to see the delight in David's face as he learned new things about Paul and we've been looking at it again in the last few weeks. For instance he said Paul dictated his letters. They were written down and then read out to the people to whom he was speaking, and David with great delight said "it's not a written word, but a spoken word. They heard read to them what Paul actually said"; and there is a difference isn't there? There is the energy that comes through someone who is speaking. The other thing is that Paul is often thought to be a misogynist and that he doesn't like women but David said that he actually worked with women and of course it's in our passage today. He had at Philippi women who had worked alongside him.

So what is the context of our reading today? We know that Philippi was a city of Macedonia and it had been raised to the rank of a Roman military colony by Julius Caesar, and it's here that Paul was breaking new ground. It was the first place in Europe that received the gospel and the first European convert was of course Lydia, and in Acts ch 16 verse 15 it says that she was somebody whose heart God had prepared. She was from Asia, she was a well-to-do business woman and after she and her family had been baptised it says "she invited us to her home". So she was a hospitable woman, and then other converts followed, notably the jailer and his family and the young church that Paul had planted there was especially dear to him. It was a church almost quite free of those errors that beset so many of the churches of that day. We remember how Paul went to the river where women were meeting to pray. If there wasn't a synagogue in a place the custom was to go to the river. That's where he met these women and as a subsequence the church was planted, but there seemed to be very few Jews there so the church did not have that Judaistic baggage which hindered so many of the churches. Paul loved them dearly; he longed for them he says and one commentator says of this epistle "this is an epistle of the heart, a true love letter, full of friendship, gratitude and confidence".

So what is the first thing he says in this passage? He urges them to stand firm in the Lord. What was Paul seeing as he spoke these words? He was in prison and there was very likely a soldier or someone on guard and the main task for a sentry or someone on guard is just that – to stand firm. If you're in London at Horse Guards Parade you will see tourists trying to get the sentries to laugh, but Paul was seeing a soldier who was standing firm. "Don't waver" he said, "stand firm in the Lord." Then he speaks directly to two women who are in disagreement. It's very likely that they were deaconesses or people in leadership in the church. One thing to notice is that he doesn't criticise them. His journey to Philippi had been without Barnabus with whom he'd had a disagreement and it says that it was so sharp that they parted company. Paul later reached a place of reconciliation with John Mark about whom he and Barnabus had disagreed as John Mark we read later accompanied Paul on a missionary journey. We don't hear any more about Barnabus; it's possible that he died because he seems to have been quite a bit older. He was of course Paul's mentor when he became a Christian. But Paul pleads with the women to become of one mind to agree with each other in the Lord. Broken relationships have a domino effect. We see this in broken marriages, we've experienced it in our family and, in a church context the fabric of our fellowship is affected if there

are people who are not one with each other. Even our prayers are affected. Scripture says in Psalm 66 "if I allow iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear me". So if I'm holding dark thoughts in my heart, things that are not pleasing to God, my prayers are affected, it says as plain as that, "The Lord will not hear me". So Paul pleads with them and he pleads with one of the leaders to help them. I find difficulty pronouncing their names. I was full of admiration for Wendy, but 1 years ago heard an old bible teacher refer to them as 'Odious' and 'So Touchy', and that's where it stuck. I don't think they were touchy. I think they were possibly business women, maybe a contact of Lydia's and that's how they had come to faith. They were probably strong characters and, says Paul, "they worked hard with me for the gospel as did Clement" and he thinks of the others that had done. So reconciliation is what he wants to happen. And reconciliation is what brought the Lord Jesus Christ to this earth. We read the "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself". Because of sin, man is naturally out of step with God. Sin and Holiness can't dwell together, and Jesus came and paid the price to bring us back to God. And for some people this is head-knowledge. They know about Jesus, they read it but it's not here (heart). And if you think to yourself 'actually that's me' because that's how I was. I'd been a churchgoer and in the choir but it was here (head), and I began to realise that it was not here (heart) and this is where we need to place the Lord Jesus Christ and if you feel that that's not been your experience, right now where you are you can say "Lord, come into my heart, come into my life" and He will. He will forgive your sin as we ask him to forgive us our sin, He will give us a new life; we become new creatures in Christ when the Lord Jesus comes into our hearts and lives.

And then it's as if Paul takes a deep breath and he says "Rejoice". This whole letter is full of joy and the word 'rejoice' comes 16 times. There are times when rejoicing comes easily. We see that someone for whom we are praying is nudged in a very small way perhaps nearer to God, and we rejoice. In other periods of our life it's not so easy. The Psalmist in psalm 51 said "make me to hear joy and gladness". It's there in the world. Make me aware of it. Help me to tune in to the joy and gladness that your presence brings. The Lord delights in those who trust in him. So Paul wants them to experience the cleansing and renewing power of reconciliation. He wants their hearts to be uplifted as they rejoice in their growing knowledge of the Lord. And now in verses 6 & 7 he asks them to relinquish anxiety and bring everything to God. Those of you who are observant will have noticed that this is our third R. Reconciliation, Rejoice and nor Relinquishing anxiety.

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus". I have been reading Philipians in other translations which we are very blessed to have in our house, and in one of them it says: "the peace of God will garrison your hearts". But Philippi was a Roman garrison, a colony, so there's that military expression again. And as we sang this morning "O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer." It really matters what we think about.

A little boy once said "thinking is when your mouth stays shut and your head keeps talking to itself". So it matters what our head keeps talking about to itself. We can learn to replace a fearful thought with positive faith-building thoughts. This is used in counselling nowadays – cognitive therapy, where people that are really overcome and threatened by fear and anxiety can learn. Our mind can be controlled. It takes discipline but we can change the way we think if we are really serious about it. If you have a really heavy and anxious load, ask God for a word for your situation. You will find that if

you have a verse of scripture to help you it will change you. I think I've told this before but I used to meet with a number of ladies and one of them was really afraid of flying, she had one daughter and she was always afraid that when she went on holiday that something would happen to her daughter while she was away. She shared this with us in the group and I said oh, you need a pill for that and one of the other ladies in the group was very shocked, a bible teacher talking about a pill, so I wrote the pill out and gave it to her. It was the verse "I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I've committed to him against that day". I said take this pill and on the plane. So she read it. She was always someone who wanted to remain in the background, but later on she wanted to tell the church that how she sat with this verse and she read it over and over again and she said "I couldn't believe how different I became" because she was trusting her daughter to God through scripture. And the scripture took her to a place where her own anxieties and worries couldn't, so if we ask God he will give us a word. It may be through talking to someone else. If you are feeling like that today do stay behind and talk to someone and they will point you to a scripture to help you. And in everything he says, give thanks. We dishonour God when we don't thank him for what he does, because God answers prayer and often we've forgotten that we've prayed for it.

So then we go into the whatever or in the old bible it's the whatsoever. In one of these other translations, verses 8 onwards: "Here is a last piece of advice, if you believe in goodness and if you value the approval of God, fix your mind on the things which are holy and right and pure and beautiful and good". And as I've just said it takes discipline. But talking about scripture helping us, Psalm 51 is a great Psalm to help us when we are feeling overwhelmed and our thinking is not in the right place. This is a Psalm that David wrote after Nathan had come and tackled him about his adultery with Bathsheba. He says "Have mercy on me O God, according to your unfailing love".

So if you find that there are sometimes when prayer feels as if there's a ceiling or a wall and nothing is happening. We feel as if God's not hearing. We sometimes feel that we don't particularly want to be praying, Psalm 51 will help us. It's good to pray scripture back to God, and if we know our heart's not right he says in verse 10 "Create in me a pure heart O God and renew a steadfast spirit within me". Or one translation is "Renew a right attitude within me. Restore to me the joy of my salvation. Grant me a willing spirit to sustain me". So when prayer is difficult Psalm 51 can be a great help.

Paul then says that he wants them to copy himself. Last week Greg was talking about role models and our reading ends with Paul urging them to model themselves on him. "Whatever you've learned or received or heard from me or seen in me, put it into practice, and the God of peace will be with you." What would life be like if we could all say that? Just imagine if we were a church where everybody could say "whatever you see in me let that be your role model". It would be very different wouldn't it?

So what sort of role model was Paul? He was somebody that dearly loved the young churches that he planted. What sort of love do we have in our hearts for each other? Do we pray for each other? I don't know whether you know that the Elders meet together for prayer once a month on a Saturday morning, and one Saturday we were in the meeting room there and we prayed pew by pew for the people that come to church. And I remember coming into the church as we were leaving and it felt as if God had got the whole congregation in his arms. Do we pray for each other? We can bring blessing into other people's lives by our prayers. In our homegroups, do we carry other people's concerns to God in prayer? Thankfulness was a habit he'd formed in all the immense difficulties he'd

suffered. He had a receptive attitude. It says in chapter 4 “I know what it is to be in need. I know what it is to have plenty. I’ve learned the secret of being content in any and every situation. Whether well fed or hungry; whether living in plenty or want.

When we were in Africa the person responsible for sending our money went on holiday to Australia for about three months and he forgot to make arrangements to send our money. Well the first month it was okay. We didn’t know he was on holiday because obviously the letter that went to him saying “help” didn’t reach him because he was away. So the second month it was getting a little bit interesting and I remember reading this and saying to God, “I wouldn’t mind learning to live in plenty right now”. But we learnt to live with little. We had friends on a tea estate a few miles away and every week they had a delivery of fresh fish for their tea pickers and the firm that sent the fish delivered too much. They had someone who worked for them who cycled past where we lived to go to his village. So on this second month this load of fish arrived and when I saw this friend of mine she said “I hope you didn’t mind us off loading our fish onto you”. Then she had a glut of beetroot and so this chap every other day brought beetroot and we had very strange meals, but we didn’t go hungry. So God is good, he supplies, and we learnt to live with little. It was good for us.

So tucked away in all these verses is the clue to Paul’s motivation and purpose in life. Chapter 4 verse 5: “The Lord is near”. This links with the verses in chapter 3 and verse 20: he says “Our citizenship is in heaven and we eagerly await a saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ”. Our citizenship is in heaven and Philippi was a colony and they were citizens of Rome, not citizens of Philippi. Paul says we have our citizenship in heaven and another translation says “we are a colony of heaven”. So he is picking up where they are at. I find it very interesting having seen this video how he has put himself in their shoes and really taking on board their life and where they are at. So our citizenship is in heaven. This was something that really thrilled David Suchet: Paul lived each day in anticipation of the Lord’s return. It gave him a sense of urgency in spreading the gospel. It would have affected every decision he made. We had a colleague in Malawi, a South African couple, for a short time they were with us and then they went back to South Africa and she was diagnosed with cancer. Her husband told us on a later visit how she changed. In a waiting room at the hospital she would talk about Jesus, and she had been a very shy person always pulling herself back. But she changed because she knew what was important and she felt that she hadn’t too much time for spreading the gospel, but it gave her a sense of urgency and Paul had that same urgency in spreading the gospel. It would have affected every decision he made.

Perhaps some of our problems and difficulties would take on a different shape if we were more conscious of the fact that the Lord is near. And world events seem to point to this more and more I feel. So may we be found to be in unity and oneness with each other, prayerful and ready when that promised day dawns and we are at last forever with the Lord. Amen.