

Philippians 1: Thanksgiving and Prayer

Philippians 1: 21 to end

Last week we had the joy of being on the south coast in beautiful sunshine, not something we're always blessed with on holiday. We spent a day in Brighton – somewhere we've not been before – and, as we emerged from an underground car park, the first tourist hotspot we came to was the i360. Built by British Airways in 2015, the i360 is a 162 metre tall tower, which houses an observation pod resembling a UFO which glides effortlessly up and then down the tower, giving its passengers a 360° view of the surrounding area. Unafraid of heights as I am, I absolutely loved the opportunity to see Brighton in the context of the South Downs in the north and the Isle of Wight in the south. On the beautifully sunny day that it was, I could see for miles.

When we come to a passage like today's from the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians, it's helpful to understand the letter in context, to have a 360° view of what was going on for Paul at the time of his writing, and his relationship with this particular Christian community. The letter itself is a real gem. It's one of the most relaxed of his epistles for, as we know, Paul has this reputation for writing to people when they'd particularly annoyed him. His letter to the Philippians however, along with 1 Thessalonians, stands out as being an epistle where he isn't particularly annoyed with the Philippian community. In fact, he's actually very, very pleased, quite proud of them, and he's writing to thank them. Of course, there are a few things he wants to correct – it wouldn't be a letter by Paul otherwise! – so it's a kind of 'two and a half cheers' sort of epistle, but infinitely more positive than other epistles such as Galatians.

The letter comes from a particular context, a time in Paul's life which makes it striking and significant. He's writing from prison. The Philippians have heard that Paul is in prison and send one of their number – Epaphroditus – with a message and a gift. This letter is Paul's response, his reply to thank them for the message and the gift. And, through it, we get an insight as to how much Paul really cares for this community, and therefore for *all* the communities he founded.

We learn that shortly after arriving, Epaphroditus became very ill indeed. We don't know how or what, but we do know that it was a life-threatening illness from which he survived. Paul is now sending Epaphroditus back with a

responding message and, in it, we get a sense of how deeply moved Paul was by the Philippians' message and by Epaphroditus putting his life on the line by bringing the message and gifts. So, it's a letter of real thanksgiving but, through it, we get a bit of an autobiography of Paul – who he is, and the importance of his ministry. More of that in the weeks to come.

Although we don't have the letter that the Philippians sent to Paul, we get the sense through Paul's reply that they were anxious that he was in prison. News of Paul's imprisonment raises the whole question of success criteria. The Philippians, because of Paul's incarceration, would have understood this as failure. If he hadn't failed as an apostle, then he wouldn't be in prison. But Paul reminds them in his reply that, in Christ, different principles are in play, that success in Christ looks very different to success anywhere else in life. Actually, Paul *is* successful despite being in prison, and it boils down to this – the proclamation of Christ. Where Christ is proclaimed there is always success and we read this in verses 12 and 13:

I want to report to you, friends, that my imprisonment here has had the opposite of its intended effect. Instead of being squelched, the message has actually prospered. All the soldiers here, and everyone else too, found out that I'm in jail because of this Messiah. That piqued their curiosity, and now they've learned all about him. (Message translation)

Rather than having failed, Paul has been remarkably successful and he wants to reassure the Philippian community of this. After all, they have supported him throughout and have greatly encouraged him by sending Epaphroditus to him with their message and gifts.

A little bit about Philippi. Philippi was an important colony in the Roman Empire. It was named after Philip II of Macedon and, in the time of Paul, was still an important community with its gold mines and trading route. And, we read from Acts 16, that Philippi was the first European Christian community that Paul formed. Paul was in Troas and receives a vision from a man of Macedonia begging him to come to Macedonia and help them. So, he puts out to sea the very next day and travels to Philippi, the leading city of Macedonia. And what happens next reveals something about how Paul starts ministry in a new place. He starts with the Jewish community and then works outwards. There's no synagogue in Philippi so he looks for Jews who might have been praying and he finds them just outside the city walls by the river. We read:

On the Sabbath, we left the city and went down along the river where we had heard there was to be a prayer meeting. We took our place with the women who had gathered there and talked with them. One woman, Lydia, was from Thyatira, and a dealer in purple cloth, known to be a worshipper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. When she and the members of her household were baptised, she invited us into her home.

And from there, the church in Philippi grew. This community was very special to Paul and his love for them overflows in his letter. The theology however feels very different in Philippians than the other epistles written by Paul. The theme that comes through is the importance and centrality of Christ. And next week, we'll look at key verses from chapter two, commonly known as the 'Christ Hymn', one of the most significant passages in the New Testament telling us who Christ is.

The other theme that comes through is whether living or dying is better for Paul, the focus of today's passage. And what Paul says is evoked by his experience – his experience of being in prison. Here he faces the question: will he survive his present imprisonment, and then be released so that he can visit them again, or will the powers of the world decide that he's better off dead? The curious thing is that Paul seems to think that he would indeed be better off dead. *'What I'd really love is to be with Christ'* he says, but this isn't a death-wish in the sense of someone losing self-esteem, becoming terminally depressed, and longing to get out of this life as quickly as possible, someone not dissimilar to Jonah sitting under his shelter railing at God having forgiven the Ninevites and letting them off the hook. No, Paul, as this letter shows, is full of life and energy and quite ready to get back to work the minute they let him out of prison. But Paul is also a man in love – with the king, the Messiah, the Jesus who, as he says in Galatians 2:20 *'loved me and gave himself for me.'*

Paul is full of hope in this letter. He reassures the Philippians that, whatever happens to him in his present imprisonment, it won't mean that everything's gone badly wrong. The gospel is still being proclaimed and people are coming to faith in Jesus Christ. But he knows that there is much more he wants to do. He's convinced that he will see them again, and he wants it to be an occasion for them to take pride in Christ Jesus. Even though his death in prison would be acceptable to him, the release and resumption of work would serve as a sign, to the churches that had been praying for it, that Jesus really is sovereign over

the affairs of empires. That, after all, is one of the main messages of the whole letter, and we need to remind ourselves of it as much today as the Philippian church did then.

Over the last six months, we have not been able to worship together as a whole church, and our worship today is different to how we would want it to be. It's wonderful that the 10.30 service returns today, but we're equally mindful of those who cannot be with us due to ongoing vulnerability. But, we can learn much from Paul's letter in how, as a church, we overcome obstacles and suffering. Be *positive*, Paul tells us in verse 25. Be *united and in solidarity with each other*, in verse 27; and *don't let yourselves be intimidated*, in verse 28.

How *can* we support each other, as church and as community, as the Covid infection rate rises and uncertainty about the future continues? It was in similarly uncertain times that Paul reminded the Thessalonians (5: 16-18) to be intentional about three things:

*Rejoice always,
pray without ceasing,
give thanks in all circumstances.*

We *rejoice* in our salvation, our peace and our home in Christ. We *pray* with the gift of the Holy Spirit praying for us, and we *give thanks* in (but not for) all circumstances. But, above all, we live as people of hope. For Paul, hope is a person, it is Christ himself. To be with the Lord forever is his heart's deepest desire, stemming from his sincere love of Jesus. In his letter to the Romans (8: 38-39), Paul assures us,

'I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

It is this assurance of the love and presence of Jesus and his Father that allows anyone who is suffering to find encouragement and comfort. Jesus himself, and his love for each of us, is the reason for our hope. So, let's live as people of hope.