

Let's get straight into the reading today.

This is how St Paul begins: **Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.**

One thing that might surprise us is that St Paul puts himself up front

As a model of living out the Christian faith for the believers at Philippi.

But this sort of statement is not a one-off in St Paul's letters:

He makes this sort of appeal a number of times.

For example, in 1 Corinthians St Paul says this:

**I appeal to you, then, be imitators of me.** 1 Corinthians 4:16

And later, **Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.** 1 Corinthians 11:1

In 1 Thessalonians he gets specific about what imitation means

Listen to what he says there: **For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you. This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate.** 2 Thessalonians 3:7-9

St Paul wants to teach the people of God

Not only by the words he speaks and writes, but also by his actions.

He wants them to look at how he is living so that they can see

What Christian faith looks like in practice, in everyday life.

As it happens we in the church understand that pastors have this role

In the church today:

People in Christian congregations should not only be able

To listen to what their pastors teach with their words.

They should also be able to look at how they live,

And get an idea of what it means to live the Christian faith here and now.

So, in the rite of installation that is used for pastors of the LCA,

And in fact was used for me here at Bethlehem,

Pastors are asked to make a number of promises as they begin their service.

I'll give you the last three:

***Do you promise to minister to the people entrusted to you by speaking God's word and listening to them, and by praying and caring for them?***

***Yes, I do.***

***Do you promise to set a good example to all people by your willing service and holy living?***

***Yes, I do.***

***Do you promise to uphold the public teaching and practice of the Lutheran Church of Australia and to accept the pastoral and doctrinal oversight of your bishop?***

***Yes, I do.***

That second last promise,

It's the same sort of thing that St Paul is talking about today.

Does this mean that St Paul was, or that Christian pastors are perfect?

No. In fact just before St Paul calls the people to imitate him

He says these words: **I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. *Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.***

St Paul is here explicitly stating that he has not reached the goal of Christian life. And I can assure you that I haven't either.

But he does say that he lets go of what lies behind:

And for St Paul this included all the good things he thought he was doing As a Pharisee, including his persecution of the church.

And he presses forward to share in the resurrected life of Jesus.

So St Paul set an example by not being weighed down by his sinful past.

He set an example by letting go of trying to earn his way into God's kingdom.

He pressed ahead by trusting in the promises of God in Christ Jesus.

And his life of service, of practical service,

Was and is an example of this sort of faith at work.

This is also how we as pastors should be for you in the church.

Again, not examples of perfection,

But examples of practical Christian living.

I think Pastor Joshua showed a good example of Christian living

When in his farewell speech over at Bethlehem House

He not only thanked you as a congregation for your care and support,

But also asked for your forgiveness when he sinned against you.

That, to me, was an encouraging example of what we can do as Christians:

That here are now we can show gratitude to those who help us,

And ask for forgiveness from others when we sin against them.

Just to be clear here, by the way,

St Paul is saying that *all of us* should imitate his example.

What's more, almost all of us have callings from God in which means

That, whether we like it or not,

We act as examples of Christian living to those around us,

Whether in the home or the workplace or the wider community.

So, as we imitate the example of the apostle,

And the good examples of Christian living in our own lives,

We also provide good examples of Christian living

To the people around us.

Not examples of Christian perfection,

But of Christian living,

Including of how we live with hope

Even in the face of our own weakness and sin.

OK, let's move on:

After encouraging the Philippians to see him as an example to imitate,

St Paul goes on to give them counter examples.

This is how he begins: **For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.**

This is obviously important teaching for St Paul.

He says that he has **often** given them this teaching,

And that he has given it with **tears** in his eyes.

Let's pause here: we are generally a rather buttoned up congregation

In a relatively buttoned up church: we do not go in for big displays of emotion.

It'd be rather unusual for me to break into tears from the pulpit.

But St Paul obviously was not averse to such a show of emotion,

And it's worth paying attention to.

When someone speaks to us with tears, this can have a real impact:

Especially if we sense that the tears are not a show, or meant to manipulate,

But come from a real place of care and concern.

St Paul then goes in to spell out what characterises enemies of the cross,

Whether inside the church or without.

He says: **Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things.**

Firstly, they are not headed to the resurrection, but to **destruction**.

This is a strong warning that we need to hear.

Secondly, **their god is their belly.**

That is, that they make satisfaction of their bodily appetites

*The most important thing in their lives.*

It's true, of course, that we have different bodily appetites

That are simply part of our being human, of being God's creatures.

But St Paul has in his sights the attitude that reduces human existence

Simply to the satisfaction of our bodily appetites.

St Paul criticises this sort of thinking and behaviour in 1 Corinthians

When people there say **Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food**, 1 Corinthians 6:13.

As a justification for using prostitutes.

This is not how it is in the Christian community:

Our bodies are made for the glorification of God,

And not simply the fulfillment of our bodily desires.

And this takes us to his third point:

St Paul says that the enemies of the cross

**Glory in what they should be ashamed of:**

That is: they boast about, they are proud of,

What they should recognise as shameful:

Whether it's visiting prostitutes, or getting drunk, or eating to excess.

St Paul sums all this up by saying that **their minds are set on earthly things.**

That they see nothing beyond this earthly existence,

And they are headed for destruction.

St Paul contrasts these attitudes and behaviours

With how it is when we live by faith in Christ.

He says: **But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.**

Now St Paul is writing to the Philippian Christians,

And Philippi was a Roman colony,

So the people of that city knew what it meant

To have the benefits and privileges of Roman citizenship.

St Paul is here getting them to think about their true citizenship:

One that is in heaven, and that from heaven the true Saviour would come,  
Jesus the Lord.

The title 'Saviour' is not used that much in the New Testament,

And scholars speculate that it might be because the term

Was often used for political rulers.

But St Paul here is talking of Jesus, whose kingdom is not of this world,

And who comes to transform our bodies,

To be conformed to his resurrected body,

And that he will do this with the same power that makes all things

Subject to him: a theme that St Paul develops at length

In that great chapter of the resurrection: 1 Corinthians 15

St Paul ends today's reading with these words: **Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.**

Sometimes we can get the idea that St Paul was a bit cerebral:

That he was mainly interested in ideas and theology,

But that he wasn't connected with people.

But then we remember that, writing from captivity, as he was,

He could write in the most direct, warm, and personal way

To the people of Philippi.

Again, perhaps we are not always used to this level of warmth,

Of love and of longing in our everyday life as a congregation.

But St Paul is modelling for us an attitude that is deeply Christian,

And can warm us in the life of faith when we are feeling cool.

So, let's, as God's dearly loved people,

Imitate the example of the saints before us,

In showing heartfelt love for each other,

In encouraging each other hopeful living,

And in forgiving each other from the heart,

So that we, who have not yet reached perfection,

May leave behind what is past,

That we may trust in the forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name,

And that we may press on towards the goal for the prize

Of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

In Jesus' name. Amen.