

05/12/2021    **Philippians 1:3-11**    1 Advent Pastor Fraser Pearce

OK, today let's get straight into the reading:

St Paul writes: **I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.**

First of all, in this whole reading St Paul is not telling the Philippian Christians to *do* anything:

He is first of all *assuring* them that they are in his prayers;

And not just that they are in his prayers,

But that he *thanks* God for them,

And that they are a cause of *joy* for him.

It's good to pause here and reflect on this,

Because often when we read or listen to the bible

We have in front of our minds what *we* have to do,

Or what we have to *stop doing*.

But most of the bible is not about what we have to do,

Most of it is about what God's kingdom is actually like,

About who God is,

About what God has done for us,

And about the kind of community that God is creating.

In this letter to the Philippians

St Paul starts off by assuring the Philippian Christians

Of the real bonds of love that he has with them.

St Paul thanks *God* for them; they are a source of *joy* for him,

And they are *sharers in the Gospel* with him.

And there's something to note:

The sharing or fellowship in the Gospel that they have.

Any human community is going to be held together

By some shared reality: maybe a common language or ethnicity;

Maybe a common education, level of income, or gender identity.

All these things are, of course, important human realities.

But for St Paul the real basis for thanksgiving, for joy, and for love,  
Is the sharing that they have in the gospel:  
In the Good News that in Christ Jesus we have the forgiveness of sins,  
We have the hope of the resurrection,  
And we together have a new shape of life given by the Spirit,  
Who frees us to look out for each other's interests.

It's evident from the letter to the Philippians  
That this looking out for each other's interests included  
Things like the financial help the Philippians gave St Paul (4:15),  
The prayers to God they made for each other (1:19),  
And the companionship and encouragement  
That came from the Philippians sending one of their members,  
Epaphroditus, to help St Paul in his need (2:25),

This is how it is for us here at Bethlehem as well.  
We have a sharing *in the Gospel* that is fundamentally different from  
And more important than things we may or may not share in  
Like ethnicity or class or gender:  
We have a common humanity, and we are together redeemed  
By the human being Jesus Christ,  
Who leads us in confessing our own sins,  
Who gives his word of forgiveness to us,  
And who gives us each other to grow us in love,  
As we pray for each other, as we support the promotion of the Gospel,  
Including financially supporting the ministry,  
And as we encourage each other in what is pleasing to God.

Now St Paul continues his letter to the Philippians  
With a heartfelt declaration of confidence in what God is doing  
Among the Philippian Christians.  
Listen to what he writes: **I am confident of this, that the one who  
began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day  
of Jesus Christ.**

There's an advent theme, by the way:

The day of Jesus Christ: his advent as the one  
Who will judge the living and the dead.  
But the main point that St Paul is making here  
Is that God shows that he is God  
By bringing to completion what he starts.

We human beings often form plans, but when we meet obstacles:  
Our own laziness, or financial difficulties, or health problems,  
We give up: just think of new year's resolutions, for example.  
But God, St Paul is saying, is not like this:  
He shows his character, his authority, his power,  
By *finishing* what he starts.

This assurance from God's word is most precious to us,  
Because when we look at the community of faith  
With all the conflicts and difficulties and struggles  
That happen in the church throughout the world,  
In our own country, in the LCA, and here at Bethlehem,  
Or when we look at our own lives,  
Our spiritual laziness or the ease with which we are distracted  
From things that we know really matter;  
Or when we look at our own weaknesses and sin,  
Then we can feel like giving up,  
And going with the flow of the world, our sinful desires,  
And the apparently plausible temptations of the evil one.  
But when God speaks his word to us,  
And reminds us that he finishes what he starts,  
Then we can have real confidence:  
The life of faith *can* be lived in the midst of conflict, weakness,  
And sin.

Remember, by the way, that St Paul is writing this letter in captivity,  
Maybe even literally in chains.  
He knows that God is in charge,  
And that being in chains does not hinder  
His proclamation of the Gospel, or the power of the Gospel

To bring people to faith, and to bring them into the community  
Of the faithful, the church, where they mature in love.

This communal aspect of the life of faith is underlined

By what St Paul goes on to say: **It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.**

St Paul's proclamation of the Gospel has got him in trouble,  
And landed him in captivity.

But the Philippian Christians have not disowned him,  
Or been ashamed of him,

Rather they have supported him,

With their prayers, with their money, with sending

What we might call a church worker, Epaphroditus,

To be with St Paul.

St Paul is not afraid that the Gospel will be hindered

Because of his imprisonment: he knows God is in charge,

And he knows that God's word *will* be fruitful,

But St Paul does feel the pain that comes from being separated  
From those he loves.

This is what he writes: **For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.**

St Paul has a gut-level love for the Philippian Christians,

A love that shows itself in his longing to be with them.

It's only after St Paul assures the Philippians of his love for them,

And of his confidence that God is indeed at work among them,

That he then shares with the Philippians the content of his prayer.

Listen to what he writes: **And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.**

St Paul knows that the Philippians have genuine love:

Love for God, for each other, and for St Paul.

So St Paul is here praying that God would give them a mature love:  
The sort of love that includes the freedom to determine  
The best course of action for themselves as individuals  
*And their life together as a community.*

We know from St Paul's letter to the Philippians and his other letters  
That this mature sort of love  
Included the ability to understand not just one's own point of view,  
But the point of view of others.  
It included looking out for the interests of others,  
And understanding that one's own freedom  
Is used wisely in the service of other people,  
Especially our brothers and sisters in Christ.  
If you want to get an idea of what I'm talking about  
Then have a look at how St Paul treats the issue of things like  
Food sacrificed to idols in 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14.

It seems to me that in our own context  
We need this sort of mature love when it comes to navigating  
Our way through the restrictions placed on us in this time of covid.  
There's no way that covid will hinder the promotion of the Gospel:  
Just as being in captivity did not stop the promotion of the Gospel for  
St Paul, so covid restrictions will not stop God's word doing its work:  
God is in charge, and his word will be fruitful.  
But *how* we live as individuals and as a community  
Under the restrictions: *how* we show love for each other,  
We learn this as we consider first of all the humility of our Lord,  
And as we share in his mindset, his attitude.

Jesus did not just think of what was best for himself,  
But became a servant to others.  
And we are free to do this as well,  
As we put our own opinions and desires on hold,  
As we listen to each other,

And as we consider each other's needs in our life together,  
Including in this time of Covid.  
Taking this path can be difficult,  
For Jesus it was the path of the literal cross.  
But in the kingdom of God the path to the cross  
Is also the path to Glory:  
Jesus, through his suffering and death, was highly exalted,  
So that at his name every knee should bend  
And every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord  
To the glory of God the Father.

May God share with us this servant mindset that was in Christ Jesus,  
So that we may indeed love and serve each other  
To the Glory of God the Father.  
In Jesus' name. Amen.