



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

God's joyous people

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Philippians 4:1-9

1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends! **2** I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. **3** Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! **5** Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. **6** Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. **7** And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. **8** Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. **9** Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Welcome to the Wesley Theatre here in Sydney, where we have just concluded a series from the Old Testament. Very soon we shall be making the short journey to Advent. In the intervening period and during Advent, we celebrate our unique Word and Deed mission and ministry at Wesley Mission in some very special services. But over the next two weeks my colleague and I will explore passages that stand on their own and have something quite specific to say to us today.

It is over three years since I last opened Philippians 4 in this Theatre and I do so this evening with a real sense that it speaks to us in the setting of the contemporary church. Its theme is that of joy and I re-visit it through the perspective of God's Joyous People.

It would be a mistake to explore Philippians without placing it into its original setting. When we deal with something that is familiar, we must not gloss over any of the apparent difficulties that exist.

Paul was writing from prison and this epistle is gathered together with a small number of other letters, often described as 'The Prison or Captivity Epistles'. Paul was like other prisoners of the day, who were dependent upon the practical support of friends and relatives in order to survive. The prison conditions in Rome and Ephesus would be distinctly different from those experienced in most prisons in the developed world.

Whenever Paul was in prison, and this was more than once, it was as a result of his allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Having served as a chaplain for two years in a high security prison, I know all too well the value prisoners place on letters and contact from family and friends. Therefore, prisoners such as Paul would be even more grateful, when food was part of their daily requirements. Non-provision of food could bring real hardship

The Philippians were held in high regard by Paul, not just because they offered him generous support, but because of the very practical nature of their discipleship. The affection was two-way and this Christian community were certainly concerned about Paul.

N T Wright wrote, "The fact that people from a different country would raise money, and send one of their number on the dangerous journey to carry it to an imprisoned friend, speaks volumes for the esteem and love in which they held him."

In Acts 16, we are told that Philippi was located in a valley by a river in Northern Greece. Though the Philippian correspondence raises challenging issues, it is one of the more accessible parts of the New Testament letters for someone beginning their exploration of such matters. This church:

- Was the first place in Europe to receive the gospel
- Grew as a Christian community from an early visit of Paul
- Offered practical support to Paul when he was in prison
- Corresponded with Paul in prison
- Paul looked forward to visiting when he was released and was free to do so

The early part of chapter 4 deals with the Apostle's personal appeal to two leaders who had clearly had a disagreement and their differences were known in the church. They appear to have held influential roles and Paul exhorted them to adopt a healing attitude to one another and come to a place of agreement.

The writer was well aware of the dangers when church people fall out with each other. He may have had in mind the possibility of the detrimental consequences of such a division, the possibility of a public row or even a lawsuit, of which we have examples in First Corinthians (1 Corinthians 6:1 ff). Paul's appeal is rooted in Jesus Christ the Lord and the description of just who Christ is had been amply recorded earlier in this epistle in the wonderful hymn in Philippians 2:5-11.

One writer strikes at what I believe is the most important issue at stake, "Quite apart from any pragmatic political damage caused by their dispute, these leaders taint and jeopardise the Christ-like example which they, like Paul, should be setting for the church."

We could spend some considerable time exploring the disagreement between these two women but, as we don't actually know the cause, it is much more important for us to discover how Paul deals with the matter.

In writing the letter, he does not take sides, but pleads with these two individuals as friends and describes them in favourable terms as long standing co-workers and those who were "fighting alongside" him in the gospel. There is no suggestion whatsoever that they were opposed to either the gospel or Paul.

Morna Hooker sums up the situation well, "He deals with the women briefly and gently, however, speaking warmly of their work for the gospel, which suggests that, although they certainly needed to see the relevance of his teaching for their conduct, the matter was not out of hand."

Our text speaks so clearly on this theme:

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”
(Philippians 4:4)

This strongly repeated theme is distinguished as a specific kind of joy, for the rejoicing is “in the Lord”.

In the paragraphs that follow, there are a good number of thoughts which may appear to have little direct connection with each other—but I believe they are a collection of differences that the joy of Christ creates in his people.

JOY SHOULD MARK OUT OUR LIFE TOGETHER

Paul’s double emphasis on the theme of rejoicing seems to indicate that whilst he refers to this church’s gifts to him, it is not his main purpose for writing. Throughout the letter, the primary concern appears to be their concord as a community and the adoption of the mind of Christ.

The epistle radiates with joy and does so in a way that challenges any petty jealousies, fractured relationships and unhelpful divisions that may exist within the life of the church. This joy, therefore, is far more than an individual religious experience; it is the kind of overflowing experience that touches every part of a community’s life.

This joy is directly linked to Jesus Christ. It is explicitly rooted in their life in him.

In verses 8 and 9, we have a wonderful picture of the qualities which Christians should reflect upon if they are to live near to Christ and work most effectively as his disciples in the world. Verse 8 contains a list of virtues, but verse 9 makes it plain it is Jesus Christ who demonstrates that they can be lived out, but only as he lives in us.

There is an interesting correlation between thinking and doing which is demonstrated by his words, *“think about such things”* (v.8) and *“put it into practice”* (v.9). Hooker is very helpful as she concludes, “The verses remind us again of the close link between the proclamation of the gospel and the moral demand to be like Christ, which rests on those who respond.”

Frequently, conversation about this theme of joy tends to be in terms of the personal and less focused upon joy in our life together. Paul was not suggesting that only individuals ought to know joy, but they should be united as a community who shared their joy with one another.

JOY AND PEACE ARE INTRICATELY BOUND TOGETHER

Paul employs two memorable imperatives: firstly, he encourages those who heard these words in the church at Philippi to find their peace and joy in God alone (v.v. 4-7) and, secondly, he commends the virtues which one writer called the “fuel for the shaping of a Christian imagination (v.8) and the example of Paul as the model for Christian practice (v.9).”

The joy and peace of Christ stand in stark contrast to the factious spirit which was seen clearly in division.

The peace of Christ liberates the Christian when it is in partnership with joy. Brad Braxton suggested that preaching on joy was to be carried out with “purposeful abandonment”. The one who declares the good news calls attention to the joy elicited by God’s action, shares in it him or herself, and summons others to it.

The fact that joy is a strength in times of challenge draws us to explore how God's peace can engage our lives and call us to something greater. The ability to display joy in difficult circumstances is a sure indicator that there is a deep inward peace.

I draw attention to some of the less accurate expressions of joy which are much closer to 'pop and fizz' than peace. Real joy flows from an enormous well of spirituality and touches the deep places of our hearts and lives.

Joy and peace are the marks of effective discipleship and distinguish the Christian in the crowd. It takes continual growth to apply this to our everyday living. It was CS Lewis who wrote, "All joy (as distinct from mere pleasure, still more amusement) emphasises our pilgrim status; always reminds, beckons, awakes desire. Our best havings are wantings."

In a very different context, Sir Wilfred Grenfell, the great missionary whose reputation and mission earned him the title 'The Great Labrador Doctor', demonstrated the gospel in Word and Deed. In far North America, he ministered amongst people most of whom had never heard of or seen the Christian faith in action. He helpfully contributes to a conversation on joy: "Real joy comes not from ease or riches or from praise of people, but from doing something worthwhile."

JOY LEADS TO CONTENTMENT, GENEROSITY AND PARTNERSHIP

It is argued by some that in New Testament Greek the words for 'rejoice' and 'farewell' are the same. The word is used far more frequently on meeting than departing and so we must be careful not to push that point too far. It certainly doesn't appear in Paul's regular style of greeting. My own take is that Paul concludes his two letters to the Corinthians and the first to the Thessalonians with a note of joy. This joy leads to a number of expressions, which we draw together.

The three practical qualities which result from the application of the fruit of joy in our lives—and most significantly in the life of a Christian community at work and service—are contentment, generosity and partnership.

It is interesting that in a letter where we discern Paul's appreciation for the support of others, he makes it clear that his joy in the Lord is not dependent upon his needs being met. He speaks about being content in all circumstances.

Generosity, of course, is a demonstration of what it means to know the joy of Christ. For this reason alone, it was worth exploring that theme earlier in the year—for generosity is such a powerful outcome of what it means to have discovered God's gift of joy.

Paul had a very close relationship with this church and, whilst we must be wary of talking about favourites in any context, there is no doubt that the Philippians held a special place in his heart. It would be unhelpful to concentrate on this partnership in mere financial terms. The relationship appears to have been so deep that he was intimately aware of the difficulties in the church.

As a young preacher, one of the challenges was a children's talk being required week after week. Many books were produced to help preachers move from the eye to the heart with our younger friends present in worship.

It took me some years to learn from an early mistake. Some books saw verse 19 towards the end of this chapter as being a kind of open cheque. I have long since discovered that our needs are far more than material and financial.

The end of the chapter is written in what could be described as 'deliberately expansive' language. What has begun in Jesus Christ concludes in Jesus Christ. The final words in the letter proper are of God's generous love, not only for the Philippians, but for all of us.

The gifts that Paul has received from the Philippian church serve to act as an indication of their genuine sense of partnership in the gospel. This thought echoes throughout the letter:

- The mutuality of suffering (1:29-30)
- Their participation in the sufferings of Christ

The partnership that Paul wrote about had a unique quality about it.

The passage we are looking at today appears in a number of church lectionaries in what is often described as "ordinary time". There is often some confusion about the use of the term 'ordinary' in this context. It comes from a Latin word which simply means 'time throughout the year'. Ordinary time, however, is actually anything but ordinary or mundane and I know of no passage that is more unique, compelling and indeed demanding than Philippians 4.

As I cross the Harbour Bridge early in the morning, I always glance up at the flags or colours that adorn its peak. From time to time, the flags change, as they have done when Sydney has welcomed special visitors—and the Aboriginal flag is always flown during the special awareness week. The flags indicate something very important.

The flag that flies high for the Christian is best described in a young child's song that I have used many times in adventure weeks and the like: "Joy is a flag flown high in the castle of my heart ... for the King is in residence there."

On one visit to an African church, I observed that the most joyous moment in the service was as the offering was brought forward. One missionary to Ghana reflected that the offering was the only time in the service when all the people smiled.

God calls us to be a joyous people. Johan Bengel, a German Lutheran pastor, described the letter to the Philippians in this way: "The whole point of the letter to the Philippians is: I do rejoice—you rejoice?"