

Sunday 13th September 2020

Philippians 4: 1-9 (Anxieties)

Talk by Laura Polaine, Prayers by Margaret Davies

Good morning and welcome to St Johns on line reflection. Today, we will be focusing on Philippians 4:1-9. First, Margaret will lead us in prayer.

Let us pray:

Before we bring our prayers to God, let's confess the times we have come short of his standards.

Lord of grace and truth, we confess with our whole heart, our neglect and forgetfulness of your commandments, our wrong doing, thinking and speaking, the hurts we have done to others and the good we have left undone. Please forgive us and raise us to new life in you because of His death and resurrection and through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Thank you that we are forgiven.

As a forgiven people, let us pray to the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit and In the name of Jesus Christ.

Almighty God, we come with thanksgiving for all your blessings to us, our life, health, family and friends, our whole world and creation.

We pray for our world, Lord. So many countries are suffering from violence and hatred. Give wisdom to governments, authorities and leaders to work towards peace and unity. We pray that all who suffer as a result will be given the help, healing, sustenance and shelter that they need. Bless all those affected by the fires in California, Oregon and Washington States. May the fires be extinguished. We pray for refugees there and in Greece displaced again by the camp destroyed by fire. May humanitarian aid be quickly sent to help them and many other refugees in our world. O Lord we pray for persecuted Christians and people in prison for their faith. Give them courage and strength to survive and witness to you.

There are many mission partners in these difficult situations spreading the gospel for whom we thank you. We pray especially for Jason and Tracey Day and family in Chiang Mai , Thailand. Bless their work and keep them safe and well.

Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for our church fellowship and family, worshipping you distanced from one another. We thank you for all the work that you have led the councils of Holy Trinity Church and ours with the archdeacon, Paul Wright to plan for our future development together. We pray for the right person who you have prepared

to be found to lead this exciting and challenging project. O Lord, bless each one of us to seek your will in discussions and prayer as we prepare positively for our future and for your work, Lord, in this community. We pray for the Christians Against Poverty centre, for Rachel, Lin and Gareth working with people in debt. Give them all the skill in counselling and energy to help. We pray for the food bank. Thank you for the gifts, givers and distributors. May it be a real help to those in need. Bless the children and staff at the school to be able to carry on the task of education once more. May we, through our home groups, and online services grow in our faith. Thank you for our leaders, preachers, council and wardens. May your Holy Spirit guide each one of us to practice what you preach.

O Lord, Our Saviour and healer, please bless all those in need in body, mind or spirit. Especially, we pray for Anthony to continue improving, for Val to become confident in walking again, For Keith and Barbara to have stamina in their frailty. We pray now in a pause, for anyone we know who is ill or suffering in any way..... Please heal, comfort and supply their needs today, Lord. "

We close our prayers with the collect [the special prayer] for this Sunday.

Almighty God, whose only Son has opened for us a new and living way into your presence, give us pure hearts and steadfast wills to celebrate joyfully and worship you in spirit and in truth, through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God now and for ever. Amen

Reading

Our reading today is taken from Philippians, chapter 4 verses 1-9 - New International Version (NIV)

Closing Appeal for Steadfastness and Unity

4 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.

Final Exhortations

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.

Talk

In today's passage Paul's discussion is of how the Philippians are to 'conduct' themselves 'in a manner worthy of the gospel', and for them to think upon and practice Christian virtues. It is in two parts; one in verses 2-3 that encourages two women to settle their disagreement and the other in verses 4-9 that advises the Philippians how to live amid the persecution they are experiencing.

In the first part Paul is addressing a relational problem; a dispute between two members of the church – Euodia and Syntyche. Whilst we are not made aware of the source of the tension, we learn that their broken friendship is no small matter, as they are workers for Christ in the church and many would have become believers through their efforts. A few reflections.

It is possible to believe in Christ and work hard for his Kingdom, and yet have broken relationships, and we are not immune. What we learn here though is that it is important for the relationship to be reconciled as soon as possible, not to wait for it to build up or wait for it to resolve itself, and if unable to resolve it, to seek the help from someone known for peacemaking. In this situation Paul chooses a trusted companion. In dealing with things sooner than later, Tom Wright puts it this way –he was chatting to a mother and grandmother who told him her golden rule was never to let more than two days' ironing pile up. After that it would be too daunting to contemplate. In the same way something that needs to be ironed out within the Christian community should be tackled as quickly as possible, before resentment solidifies and cannot be softened and melted. For Paul to have heard about Euodia and Syntyche's dispute gives the impression that it had been going on for some time.

Importantly, Paul addresses each woman equally. The use of the word 'plead' before each name communicates a desire to be even-handed - not to take sides. Simply, Paul is saying that they should be in Spirit-produced fellowship with one another, and this relationship should be characterised by 'tenderness and compassion', and a unity of purpose. Paul emphasises the importance of the two women to be united with one another because they are *in the Lord*, or expressed another way they are to adopt a common mind *in the Lord*; to put the interests of each other first in order to drop their quarrel. Those who live in Christ are equipped to overcome circumstances that would dishearten unbelievers and disrupt their friendships, and Paul wants them both to put

this principle into practice in their relationship with one another. Through this example Paul is encouraging the Philippians to stand unified in the Lord for the sake of the gospel.

In essence there can be no difference between what we believe and what we practice. For example - if we believe 'God is the creator of heaven and earth' we cannot exploit his creation in ways that dishonour him. If we believe in the forgiveness of sins through the death of Jesus Christ then we cannot refuse to forgive the sins of others. Paul's approach is a model for the modern day church too; to be willing to mediate, but to do so in the gentle and impartial way Paul illustrates.

As we look at the second part of the passage in verses 4-9, we see Paul advises the Philippians how to live amid the persecution they are experiencing. In verse 4, 'Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!' On the one hand it may seem strange that a man, in prison, would be telling a church to rejoice and celebrate in the Lord, but Paul's attitude of joy teaches us an important lesson. Our inner attitudes do not have to reflect our outward circumstances. The joy that Paul calls for is not happiness that depends on circumstances but a deep contentment that is *in the Lord*, based on trust in the sovereign, living God, and that therefore is available *always*, even in difficult times. Paul was full of joy because he knew no matter what happened to him, Jesus Christ was with him. Ultimate joy comes from Christ dwelling within us. In verse 5 it says 'Christ is near', now, but then later at his second coming we will *fully realise* this ultimate joy. He who lives within us will fulfil his final purposes for us.

When we go through difficult or uncertain times, including current times of Covid-19, and times of change, they can be worrying times; there may be worries in the home, at school, at work, or in not having a job etc. But what is worry? Corrie ten Boom defined worry as 'a cycle of inefficient thoughts whirling around the centre of fear'. It is like being pulled in different directions. Our hopes pull us in one direction; our fears pull us the opposite direction and we are pulled apart. Worry is a great thief of joy. It's not easy not to worry, and if someone says try not to worry, one may then worry about worrying itself, and not to worry about anything seems like an impossibility! But Paul's advice is to turn our worries in to prayers in verse 6: Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. As we reflect on the upcoming changes in St John, we may be excited, but also feel slightly anxious not having all the details at this stage, and that is okay; as it is a journey we will do together and in prayer.

If the Philippians follow Paul's advice of prayer, he says then 'the peace of God, which transcends all understanding' will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus'. The word guard in this context is from a military term; it protects like a military garrison would from inside a city. What Paul is saying is that God exchanges our worries for his peace. God's peace is different from the world's peace. The word for peace means far more than an absence of hostility. It means wholeness, soundness, well-being, oneness

with God and every kind of blessing and good. It is a peace, which ‘transcends all understanding.’ It surpasses both our ability to cope, and our anxiety about what is to come. True peace is not found in positive thinking, in absence of conflict, or in good feelings. It comes from knowing that God is in control. Our citizenship in Christ’s kingdom is sure, our destiny is set, as we can have victory over sin.

To look to conquer worry if we can focus on 3 things: i) right praying (verses 6,7), ii) right thinking (verse 8), and iii) right living (verse 9).

Right praying In verse 6 in the Message version it says ‘Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns’ (vs 6 MSG). Right praying includes i) adoration, devotion, and worship, ii) supplication and iii), thanksgiving. In talking to God about everything that concerns us and him is the first step toward victory over worry. People sometimes say today that one should not bother God about trivial requests. – for example – a parking space in a busy street. Though our intercessions will normally focus on serious and major matters, we note that Paul says we should ask about every area of life. There is nothing too small that escapes God’s notice, and nothing too big that surpasses his power. If it matters to you – it matters to God.

As we focus on our requests, it is also important to have an attitude of *thanksgiving*; it contributes directly to this inward peace. It may be helpful if you write down any specific requests that you have, so that you can look back at the ways in which God has answered your prayers. If we do this, we can then give thanks and our confidence in prayer will increase. One illustration author Warren Wiersbe highlights of the peace through prayer in the bible is the story of Daniel. When the king announced to his subjects that they were to pray to no-one except him, Daniel went to his room and instead prayed as he was used to doing; he gave thanks to God, and gave his requests. The result was peace in the midst of difficulty; Daniel was able to spend the night with lions in perfect peace, while the king in his palace could not sleep.

Second, **Right thinking** - Verse 8 in the Message version ‘Summing it all up, friends, I’d say you’ll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse’. What we put into our minds determines what comes out in our words and actions. Paul says to the Philippians to fill their minds with things that will inspire worship of God and service to others. Similarly, we are to programme our mind with thoughts that are ‘true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy.’ If we have wrong thoughts these can lead to wrong feelings, and before long the heart and mind are pulled apart and we worry. Thoughts are real and powerful, even though they cannot be seen, weighed or measured. We are surrounded by images and words from the media, conversations and events, which can so easily tempt us, almost daily, with wrong thoughts. But we can resist this. As Martin Luther said, ‘You can’t stop a bird flying overhead, but you can stop it nesting in your hair.’ The way to get wrong thoughts *out* is to get right thoughts *in*. Your mind cannot be

unoccupied. If you don't occupy your mind with good thoughts the enemy will fill it with bad ones. Above all we can read God's Word and pray. We can ask God to help us focus our minds on what is good and pure.

Lastly, **Right living** - In verse 9 in the Message version it says 'Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized.' It is not enough to hear or read the Word of God or even to know it well. We must also put it into practice, and this is the hardest part. Though, we know the way to learning any skill, trade or sport is by practising. If we practise; avoiding quarrels, staying united with other Christians, and avoiding anxiety by continual prayer, then Paul promises that 'the God of peace will be with you'. As we make progress in this way, we will find that it is not simply the peace of God but **the** God of peace *himself* who will be with us. It is the peace of God who guards us and the God of peace guides us. The passage concludes at the end of verse 9 in the Message version, that if we change the things we allow our mind to dwell on, 'God who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies.

Let us pray:

Dear Lord, thank you for the words of Paul to the Philippians, and for his example to us. Paul did not worry about his needs being met. He had learnt that the '*secret of contentment*' in every situation, in plenty or in want, was that he could do everything through 'Him who gives strength' Thank you, that whatever situation we are in, you promise to strengthen us to do whatever you are calling us to do. Lord, today we bring to you our anxieties. Thank you for the promise of your peace, which transcends all understanding.

Amen

Closing Prayer

May the grace of God uphold you,
the peace of God surround you,
the love of God flow from you
and the strength of God protect
and bring you safely through this day.