

Philippians chapter 4 – reflective worship

Anyone used to Paul's letters being full of rather brusque instructions as to how the recipients should conduct their lives cannot fail to find this final chapter of Philippians much gentler in its approach than other of his writings. Even the parts where he is telling the Philippians how to live are framed in a positive way, good things to be encouraged, rather than a list of don'ts. And what was encouraging for the Philippians can also be encouraging for us.

The themes of the chapter are live in unity, praise God and pray to God, look for good things, and share and be thankful. Themes whose relevance for us is equally strong.

In verse two Paul urges two of the women to come to a mutual understanding – live in unity. Yes, he urges them but is in no way damning of their need to seek common ground. We all see things differently, have different experiences and different aims. Focus on what we have in common, rather than where we differ.

Unity, togetherness, is not something that we automatically achieve. I am reminded of the time a few years ago when for nine days as a parish we said morning and evening prayer together. It is the psalms that I remember. How to say them together? Negotiating the fast talkers, and the slow readers, the people for who a verse without the pause at the appropriate place is a psalm said badly, is no easy feat. By the end of nine days, we had learnt to listen to each other, to allow leaders to emerge, to talk a middle path, and to talk it together.

Good practise for working together and for the time of discernment we are looking forward to in Lent when led by Paul we will be thinking about the future of the parish.

Praise God and pray to God. It keeps appearing that word – rejoice – feel or show great joy. One of the side effects of the pandemic has been a general heightening of emotions. Little things which in the past would have gone almost unnoticed have become of great importance, as has the joy or sorrow that accompanies them. Elsewhere Paul tells us to 'be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep'. It can be hard to share other's joy when our own sadness is hard to bear, or sometimes to hide our own joy. But we are commissioned to share those emotions with our community. There was rejoicing in our house when through the wall we heard a tiny cry for the first time and knew that Julie and Jonathan's baby had been born.

We are all different and I do understand that while I can take comfort from knowing that my bad days are someone else's good days for others that is impossible. Those are the times when it may be more appropriate to feel the joy than to show it. To use our prayers to thank God for the good things that he has given us.

A few months ago part of this chapter from Philippians was one of the readings on a Sunday when I was preaching. I became fascinated by the list in verse eight. It just seems to come from another place. It neither implies that we are all miserable sinners, or sets us standards of behaviour that are surely unattainable. This is a list that acknowledges that we are human and fallible and at the same time that we can be loving and creative.

(Apologies if the wording differs from your Bible but these are the words from the version that I am using)

'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.'

It invites us to focus on the positives, on the things that we see are good, on the things that we do well. To make those the important things in our lives. Then the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds. Seems familiar. Well apart from Biblical familiarity it is very similar to the advice about looking after our mental health that abounds in magazines and other media at present.

And good advice for a parish thinking about its future. Considering what we do well, what fits less well into a changing world, and what we need to do better. Perhaps most importantly it is not about guilt or beating ourselves up, it is about recognising reality. We should expect to move in a changing world and those vague definitions of goodness are so much more helpful than a prescriptive list.

As a parish we have a good track record for sharing material things. People continue to support the foodbank even though they have had to find new ways, sewing machines are busy stitching bags, and the response to the gift tree before Christmas was phenomenal. One of our neighbours had spotted the stream of people leaving bags in our porch and assumed that we must be ill. (it is probably good that she didn't witness our granddaughter trying on her nativity costume in the step) Requests for donations for specific projects are well supported. But what else could we be sharing.

With social interaction severely clipped, even those who don't live alone are joking about how much they have seen of family members over the past few months. Paul points out to the Philippians that he can adapt to living in whatever way he has to, that God has empowered him to do this, but that he is grateful for their support. We are learning to adapt but can still support each other with contact, with conversation and with listening. I have noticed that the typical Midland greeting, 'You a'right?' no longer simply means 'Good morning', but is often seeking a, hopefully affirmative, response. It is too easy however to restrict ourselves to talking to people that we know well. Often the ones who already have a lot of social interaction. Think about joining our Lenten prayer chain. One of the joys of the Advent chain was to have two conversations with people that we don't normally chat to, those conversations could continue after Easter.

As we move forward through and hopefully out of this pandemic, we can take the themes of Paul's letter with us – share, listen and rejoice together.

We won't throw together a blueprint for the future of the parish overnight. It needs us all to think about what we and others value. We may need to ask questions about what we don't understand, or about what we have control over. But the sooner we start thinking about it and discussing it the better the blueprint will be when it does emerge.

Start with those qualities that Paul urged the Philippians to think about:

'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.'

Perhaps as a first step try to make a list of three things:

One thing that you really value and feel it is important to continue.

One thing that we don't do (or don't do in the best way) but you feel we should do.

One thing that we could consider not doing any longer.