

Prologue

The Church at Philippi was the first Church founded by St Paul on European soil. Furthermore it was generous and supportive of his mission and ministry. The Philippian community then, holds a special place for Paul and naturally he wants the best for them; and in this generally warm and gentle letter he seeks to encourage them in their growth and warn of possible dangers that could prove tricky.

The community itself was largely made up of Roman citizens, possibly some army veterans; it was a place where women played a role and there would have been members who were slaves. So a real mixture of status, culture and outlook. Paul wanted the best for them but also he was well aware of how division could be fatal for the Church at Philippi, especially with all of those differences and cultural expectations; so in this passage, he encourages them to look for what it is that ultimately unites them and binds them together, which is of course Christ.

But also, he shows them how Christ has shown them how it is possible for them to find unity in diversity through the virtue of humility.

Unity

“Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind”

So I wonder: is this possible: can a group of diverse and unique entities ever be able to be united in this way; of the same mind and share the same love? Does God really create us all differently and uniquely yet expect us to hold to exactly the same views, beliefs, standards, values and principles? Is this not a contradiction in creation?

Well I think the first things we have to do is understand that unity does not mean uniformity. Uniformity demands that we look, think and behave in exactly the same way. In uniformity, there is no room for difference in any of these things. No acceptance in the diversity; no excitement in variety. A world of uniformity is frankly, quite dull and boring. That does not reflect God’s creation as I know it.

Unity, on the other hand, allows for our differences, diversity and variety and desires harmony to bind everything together. This is not just to *tolerate* difference, but to *celebrate* it, and use it for the common good of the whole community.

9th Sunday after Trinity
Philippians 2
St Johns, 6 August 2023 Reflective Worship

I suppose, much like today, people in the first century were brought together by holding a similar social status; or sharing a similar political or philosophical outlook on life; or sharing mutual hobbies and interests. But for the Philippians it was to be different.

They are brought together in unity, not by these things but by their common belief in, and commitment to, the Gospel – the good news of Jesus. And, by being joined together by the power and love of the Holy Spirit.

So even allowing for the many differences in the Philippian Church, unity was possible and should be desired by all.

Humility

So how did St Paul encourage the Philippians to go about achieving this?

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves”

So what is humility? I wonder how you would define it?

In St Paul’s context, it means a humble attitude of the mind. And in the context of Philippians 2, we have to appreciate that the city of Philippi was a Roman colony – the Church therefore probably had a large contingent of Roman citizens to whom their culture was based

9th Sunday after Trinity
Philippians 2
St Johns, 6 August 2023 Reflective Worship

on status, social rank and hierarchy. They would never see being humble as a virtue because it was slaves and the lower ranks who were humble, and Romans were not slaves and would never consider themselves amongst the lower ranks.

So when Paul says to consider others, especially others in the congregation who might be slaves, as more important than you, a Roman citizen – well, it was shocking.

Humility¹ is one of the key character traits that crops up frequently throughout the Bible. In psalm 113 God is said to be high and great and yet humble enough to stoop down to take an interest in what lies beneath even the dust of the earth. Proverbs 15:33 tells us humility comes before honour; and many people in the Old and New Testaments are praised for showing humility. One of the most famous parables of Jesus, the tax collector and the Pharisee is a good example of one way this parable has been interpreted to encourage humility.

Some of the most influential theologians of the Church have written of the importance of humility. Augustine of Hippo said that *“for those who would learn God’s ways, humility is the first thing, the second thing and the third thing”*. And when Martin Luther was

¹ Tapeinophrosyne –humble attitude of mind

9th Sunday after Trinity
Philippians 2
St Johns, 6 August 2023 Reflective Worship

asked about which of the virtues would rank as the top three, he echoed this: *“first is humility, second, humility and third, humility”*.

One of my favourite Christian writers CS Lewis wrote that humility is *“not having a low opinion of one’s talents and character, but rather a sense of self forgetfulness”*. This was paraphrased beautifully as *“not thinking less of ourselves, but thinking of ourselves less”*.

To the Philippians then, St Paul offers the example of Christ’s *humility* as the ultimate example of humility. The Church should live with a humble attitude of mind because Jesus lived like this. He did not consider himself equal with God but took the form of a slave, and died as one who was of the lowliest rank – all because he lived with the mind-set of humility.

Humility therefore is a key ingredient to unity

Epilogue

And I think this is as important today as it was then. Unity and humility are vital for any Church community. Our national Church is currently grappling with some big decisions which are already compromising our unity. It’s true that many of those engaged in these debates could do with reflecting on this call of St Pauls to value

9th Sunday after Trinity
Philippians 2
St Johns, 6 August 2023 Reflective Worship

unity and practice humility and to consider others who have traditionally been looked down on, as just as important.

We are all called to promote the interests of others, to pray for the Holy Spirit to bind us together and to be inspired to seek the mindset of Christ who showed the way of God is not preoccupation with status but humble service. Amen