

Reflective Worship – Sunday 2nd July

Philippians 1

One of the things we do on the START course is to ask people what they know about Jesus. This time we came up with a large sheet of paper covered in facts and opinions about what Jesus did, what kind of person he was and what happened to him. Loving, kind, forgiving were just 3 of the many words our recent group came up with.

What would our sheet of paper look like, I wonder, if we thought about St Paul instead of Jesus. My guess is that we might have words like harsh, single minded, opinionated, arrogant, maybe even self righteous. Paul is perhaps someone we find it hard to warm to. His letters in the NT can be hard and challenging to read – and we might think they must have been even more challenging for the original recipients to read!

But this letter – the letter to the Philippians - is very different. Its sometimes known as ‘the joyful letter’ and in contrast to some of the other letters in the NT presents a positive, affirming and heart-warming picture of Paul – in particular regarding his relationship with the people in the church in Philippi.

What then do we know about the church in Philippi? It was founded in around AD51 by Paul and was the first church on European soil. In Acts 16 we read about Lydia - a merchant -, an unnamed slave girl and a Roman jailer all becoming Christians there. A very diverse group of people.

We might well remember the strange story of how the jailer and his family became Christians. Following a minor riot Paul and his companion Silas were imprisoned. An earthquake in the middle of the night caused major damage to the prison, and the jailer woke up expecting everyone to have escaped. Amazingly all the prisoners were still there. They proceeded to explain the gospel message to the jailer. He and his family were baptised there and then.

What we gather from the letter written just a few years later when Paul was in prison again – this time probably in Ephesus – is that the church in Philippi were very fond of Paul and he they.

The letter begins with the theme of joy “I thank God every time I remember you, constant praying with joy in every one of my prayers for you”. Paul rejoices in their partnership in the gospel, in their love, in the encouragement and practical help they give him. He urges them to stand firm in the gospel they heard from him and not to be swayed by others, he reminds them of Christ’s example and talks of the promise of being with Christ.

The letter is a pleasure to read – and gives a very different view of Paul from other letters. It meets one of the basic human needs – the need to be encouraged. And I hope our looking at it over the next few Reflective Workshops encourages us in our Christian faith!

Today, then, I want to pick up a couple of the themes that come up in chapter 1.

Suffering and death.

What, you say, – in this so called joyful letter you've picked out suffering and death to have a look at this evening! But, hold on to your horses, even in these things Paul presents a joyful and encouraging viewpoint.

Suffering is often seen as the greatest argument against a loving, caring God. Why does God allow people to suffer? Why is life so unfair? Why do the good seem to suffer and the bad get away with things?

A few months back we looked at the book of Job. Job was asking those self same questions. He didn't get the answer to those questions, but God enabled him to see the bigger picture.

So perhaps they are the wrong questions to ask. The world is as it is. And it is a world that is messed up – as Christians we might call the mess "sin" – and part of that mess is suffering. Some caused by ourselves, some by others and some suffering that we cannot see the cause of. The more important question, I think, is how we respond to the suffering that we encounter.

Paul – a great theologian and one who never shies away from a defence of God – never attempts to explain why there is suffering. He takes it as a given. What he does talk about is how he works through that suffering.

In his second letter to the Corinthians he shows quite plainly that he is well versed in suffering.

Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters;^[b] ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.

In our letter Paul is in prison, but he does not complain of his lot, nor ask God why. Rather he sees the bigger picture and recognises that him being in prison has actually enabled the gospel message to be preached more and more. He sees the truth that so often God works through our suffering and our failures to bring about good. Not that God wants us to suffer, rather that he brings good from it – he redeems it if you like. I am sure, given space to reflect, we can all recall instances of this in our own lives which is not to say it always happens of course.

This line of thought reminds me of how Graham Smith reflected on his terminal illness. You may recall some of the articles he wrote for the magazine, or that moving video interview he did as he shared his thoughts on living with a terminal illness. I remember talking to him once, and he was saying how he found it hard that he couldn't do the things he had always done; and he felt he had nothing to offer any more. As we talked he came to realise that there were many different things that he was still able to do – and he spent much time in his last months on the telephone – phoning people up, praying for them and encouraging them.

Graham could also teach us some important lessons about our attitude to death, much as Paul does. Death can be, I think, even in Christian circles a taboo subject. But tonight we will take the plunge and look at it. As we move on in this chapter, Paul comes out with one of those phrases that make us sit up and take notice.

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; ²⁴ but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.

He sees death not as a failure or a disaster, but as the culmination of life. The point when he would be with the Lord. And therefore he sees death as something not to be feared, but to look forward to with joy and anticipation.

Our view today may well be that when we die we “go to heaven” and perhaps there are a million and one views of exactly what we think that might mean.

The Bible isn't overly explicit about exactly WHAT happens when we die, but is clear that for us, as those who trust in Christ, death is not to be feared. Biblical scholar Tom Wright feels that the overall message from the New Testament is that we will be with Christ when we die and that the resurrection – a bodily resurrection like that of Jesus – will come later. The dying thief would today be with Christ in paradise, but that would be followed by the resurrection.

Its this that helps Paul make that statement that he sees his death – being with Christ – as something to desire more than his life. I don't think I could say that – but then I have family and I don't think Paul was in that position – but the important thing here is that we shouldn't fear death, nor fear talking about it.

Paul then was able to look at life in a very different way to the way many look at it today. He saw not what was happening, but what might happen. He looked for how God would bring good from all the mess around him, and he looked beyond the confines of the here and now to being in the presence of God. Life was to be lived, not to be complained about. Death was not to be feared.

So lets take a few moments now to do a couple of things

first to look back over our lives and try to identify times where things haven't gone as we wanted, but where in the end God has brought good things.

so for this you have a black stone. Use this to think of something that has not gone well – whatever “suffering” it might be. Then think about what good has come from that. Exchange it for a green stone to represent life and growth. It may be of course that the good is still to come.

And second to think about death. Ask ourselves questions. DO we fear death? Are we afraid even to talk or think about it. How can we come to terms with our mortality and see death as something positive?

And for this – if you wish – take one of the smooth stones and as you hold it and feel it, think about your life; think about the promise that Jesus offers of life in its fullness, eternal life. And take that stone with you today as a reminder that death is not black, and is not to be feared.