

Philippians 1:12-30 / John 17:13-23

Sermon shared by Andrea Ward

Good morning!

Last week, Jenny introduced us to our new sermon series looking at Paul's letter to the Philippians, and if you haven't listened yet to Jenny's sermon, I really do urge you to do so!

And so, this morning we're looking at the second half of chapter 1 of Philippians.

And to begin, I'd like you to imagine receiving news today that a pastor you had known well, perhaps here in Chatham or somewhere else, had been arrested for proclaiming their faith in Christ and was being held in a police cell. I wonder how you'd feel? Your first reaction might be one of shock, deep concern and a keen sense of the injustice; you might also feel concerned for the church and Christians in that area, and how they would be feeling; and then perhaps fear that this could happen here, to me, to us?

In the second half of Philippians chapter 1, it's clear that part of Paul's reason for writing to his fellow Christians in Philippi was to reassure them about his condition and to encourage them. They'd heard that this great apostle, their *friend* who had introduced them to the Lord Jesus Christ and had been having such an impact for the gospel, had been imprisoned. And as Paul wrote his letter to them, how he must have imagined their deep concern and fear for his well-being. And how much he must have wanted to reassure them. So, he writes (vs 12-13):

"Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ."

Paul wanted his friends to know that, hugely difficult as it was, he saw his situation as an opportunity - an opportunity to spread the gospel in a place that wouldn't have been in his sphere of influence had he not been arrested. The palace guards weren't just any old soldiers; their positions were highly paid and sought after. They would have had contact with significant others, and it was clear that not only they but "everyone else" in the palace, was hearing about Jesus Christ as a result of Paul's powerful witness within his incarceration.

I'm reminded of a more recent story of another prisoner who impacted some of those who were guarding him. Back in 1978, an 18 year-old pro-apartheid white man called Christo Brand arrived at the notorious Robben Island prison in South Africa, to be a prison guard. It was, of course, the prison where Nelson Mandela was being held. Brand says, 'When I came to the prison, Nelson Mandela was already 60. He was down-to-earth and courteous. He treated me with respect and my respect for him grew. After a while, even though he was a prisoner, a friendship grew. It was a friendship behind bars' (from The Guardian, 20th May 2007). It was a relationship that would transform his life. So impacted was he by the dignity and behaviour of Mandela, that Brand would completely change his views about racial oppression.

I hope and pray that we'll never find ourselves being held in prison for our faith. But we will all experience trials and difficulties in our lives, and some of them because of our Christian faith. And we should never underestimate what others can see and experience of Christ in us, if when under pressure we dig deep into our relationship with God. Let me share a story from my own life. I was in my early twenties when I had the experience that many of us have been through, of a dating relationship coming to an end. I was devastated for the best part of a year.

In my pain, the one thing I could do was to dig really deep in my relationship with the Lord. And while the pain didn't go away, what I experienced in that time was the sweetest and deepest joy I have ever known - quite simply, Jesus in me and with me. And then one day, several months down the road, one of my colleagues at work told me how she had wondered what was going on in me, because she knew how desperately hurt I was and yet had seen this amazing other emotion I was experiencing (she meant joy, even if she didn't use that word) and had recognised that this was something to do with my faith in Christ. I had no idea that she was seeing Jesus in me! And often, we won't - but be sure that people can see him in us!

Paul goes on to say:

"And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become more confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear."

Paul being "taken out" had actually had the effect of others stepping up and developing a new boldness and confidence in telling people about Jesus. The Christians at Philippi and we today, might have been surprised to hear this - after all, if your leader had been put in jail for preaching about Jesus, why would you then go and do exactly the thing that would risk you ending up in jail too? Isn't this about the grace of God for his church when under persecution? How often we've heard stories of the church when under intense pressure, rising up in boldness for their Lord!

Paul may have been in chains, but the gospel was spreading freely in the palace, in the heart of Roman power, and out on the streets among the common people.

"Because of *this* I rejoice" Paul says (verse 18).

Paul rejoices because Christ is preached! I can imagine him chuckling to himself at the irony of how his chains had had the exact opposite effect to the one that had been intended. I love the way The Message bible puts it, "Instead of being squelched, the Message has actually prospered." Don't we just love it when God works in this amazing way, confounding human powers!

Before we move on to the next part of the passage, let's pause for a moment. You see, because of the way Paul writes, it would be very easy to gloss over the deep suffering out of which his joy came: imprisoned, with the discomfort and indignity of being bound by chains, not knowing what the future held for him. Paul must have grappled too with his natural frustration at not being out there preaching to crowds and visiting churches; and although he says that the only thing that mattered was that Christ was preached, it was clearly painful for Paul to know that some of those preaching were doing it out of envy and rivalry (taking advantage of his situation to make themselves more important, maybe, or to gain a following in his absence, wanting to stir up trouble for him.) Perhaps there were people, too, who were talking about his time being up, God abandoning him etc. I imagine that this must have hurt far more than the chains around his wrist and ankles. And maybe, just maybe, deep down, Paul struggled with a tiny bit of bruised pride - that actually, the church was doing very well without his preaching ministry, thank you. He was a human being, after all - he was no more immune to these kind of thoughts than we would be. Paul's joyful response wouldn't have been a *natural* response to his situation, surely.

The Bible commentator, Alec Motyer, writes:

"Paul relates his experiences with such a light touch that we might be deceived into thinking that what is easily told was easily accomplished. But why should it have been any easier for

Paul than it is for us to leave the path of self-pity, to talk more of Christ than of our complaints and to accept each and every circumstance as the place of duty he has appointed? Such notoriously difficult attitudes of mind and heart are brought about only by practice, by hard-won choices in the very heat of tribulation which works patience."

If we think that we could never respond like Paul in such sufferings, be encouraged that he didn't just flick a switch on and feel this deep joy instead of self-pity. As he says later on in this letter, "I have *learned* to be content whatever the circumstances..." (Chapter 4:11). Paul had been on a long journey of choosing to accept God's will, choosing to adopt the same attitude as Christ in each and every situation that came his way. And although of course, none of us would want suffering or difficulties and trials, within every situation there is an opportunity to learn and develop the kind of response that Paul had learnt. Rooting ourselves in the knowledge that I really am secure in God's love and that come what may, he is in charge, and I am totally safe in him; nothing can separate me from his love. Surely, this is what Paul had learned deep in his heart and was the deepest source of his joy.

"Because of this I will rejoice" Paul says, and then goes on (vs 18-19), "Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance (salvation). "

A great apostle Paul may have been, but he was no super-human in a different league to us: he knew he needed the prayer support and encouragement of fellow Christians and the power of the Holy Spirit every bit as much as we do. But notice what he said he needed it for: not so that things would get better or easier, not that he'd be released, but that this would be for his deliverance and whether that was by life or death, that he would have sufficient courage "so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body" (vs 20).

What was at the forefront of his mind, his greatest concern? That Jesus be magnified (literally "made larger") in his body, his whole being displaying Christ.

Which leads us into this extraordinary dilemma of Paul's: "To live or to die: which one do I desire." Wow.

This isn't about Paul dwelling on thoughts of death because he wants to be released from his suffering (understandable as that might be). It's about a tug between two powerful passions within him - his longing to see Jesus face to face and to be with the Lord he loves so much, and his deep affection for the Christians of Philippi and his desire to continue his journey with them "in their progress and joy in the faith". Paul's dilemma may just feel a bit beyond us, if we're honest. The instinct to live is (naturally and healthily) a strong one. But I would really encourage you to take some time to dwell on, to chew over those words of Paul: "To live is Christ and to die is gain". To live is Christ and to die is gain. The Message bible captures Paul's meaning wonderfully: "Life versus even more life! I can't lose." To live means knowing Jesus; to die means knowing Jesus a whole lot better: more than that, knowing Him completely. In all the challenges, trials and tribulations that we might experience in our life here and now, this is the joy that is ours, and can never be taken away. This is the glorious hope which is ours to share.

So, having made his choice to "live", but aware too that he had no control over what would actually happen to him, Paul turns his thoughts to encouraging them. In the last verses of this chapter (vs 27-30) Paul calls them to rise up in faith. It's as if Paul is saying:

"Ok guys! Now you know how I'm doing. Yes, I'm in the thick of it, but just look at what God is doing and the joy this is giving me. Now join with me in being bold and fearless in sharing your

faith; stand together as one, as your Lord prayed himself for you; live like me with your eyes fixed on your heavenly destiny and in a way that is a credit to your Lord and the message He's given you. And remember that whatever struggle you're facing, it's part of the privilege he's given you as one of his followers."

This is Paul's "Come on!" to the Christians in Philippi and to the Christians of Chatham, to us today. To take encouragement in our own lives from his example and his experience of Christ with him in the most challenging of circumstances; to be emboldened together in our faith and the sharing of our faith, knowing that God's work and the message of Christ won't be squelched but will prosper. And in it all, to know the deep, deep joy of Christ within us in this life and the life to come: for to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Amen.