

Philippians 2:12-18 / Matthew 5:13-18

Sermon given by Andrea Ward on 31st January 2021

Good morning.

Over the past few weeks we've been delving into Paul's epistle to the Philippians and the many jewels and treasures contained in the pages of this beautiful letter.

Our passage this morning begins with Paul urging his fellow Christians in Philippi:

"Therefore, my dear friends...."

Yes, it's another of those "therefore's" which Jenny mentioned last week. Or to put it another way: "Because of this...."

Because of what? Well, let's remind ourselves of what has just gone before. Paul had just been telling the Christians in Philippi that their attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, using the words of what's thought to be an early Christian hymn. Words reminding them and us of the servant nature of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose humility and obedience led him to die on the cross.

And it's in light of this example, this attitude shown to us by our Lord, that Paul urges:

"Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed - not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence - continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

"As you have always obeyed..." It's not entirely clear whether Paul is referring to their obedience to him or to the Lord, but we know, of course, that the Lord calls us to obey his commands, his teaching.

Obedience is not exactly a "sexy" word in our culture. Hardly surprising, as it's a word that has been used so often through history to oppress and subjugate. Even for those used to reading the Scriptures, that word "obey" may not sit entirely easily with us, and the bible is full of examples of people struggling to obey God. So, how do we define obedience?

Well, one definition is "submission to another's authority". In any land, there are laws and authorities which we must obey, even if at times we might prefer not to! As Christians, in our relationship with the God of the universe, the One who made us and sustains us, we recognise that the Lord holds the ultimate and eternal power and authority in all creation. Yet, in itself, this possibly doesn't *draw* us to obey and submit to God, but it is the example of Jesus Christ which Paul has just described, which I think, gives us the real *desire* to obey.

And so it's really important that we remind ourselves again of the nature of the one to whom we're being called to obey. Hebrews 5:7 & 8 reminds us that Jesus was heard "because of his reverent submission" and "although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered, and became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him."

We're called to obey Jesus, who, through his own obedience to his Father, became the source of our salvation. Through obedience Jesus was given this immense and eternal reward of being the One in whom all people can find the gift of eternal salvation, if we, in turn, obey him. When we reflect on Jesus' obedience, humility and sacrifice for our sake, the call to obey him is about

responding to his love for us, by loving him in return. Obedience is grounded in love and gratitude.

And so Paul, calling on the Christians in Philippi to continue to obey in his absence, calls them also to "...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

Now, of course, Paul isn't talking about "earning your salvation" here. He is really clear in other parts of his letters that we are saved by faith in Christ alone, not by any work or merit of our own. So, what does he mean then by "continue to work out your salvation"?

Some years ago, I finally gave up my annual subscription to a local gym. I was all signed up, a fully subscribed member, but I just never went and used the equipment to actually do the workouts that would help strengthen and tone my physical muscles and increase my physical fitness. Likewise, we can be saved through faith in Christ, but if we're not continuing to exercise our spiritual muscles and "work out" spiritually, then we'll never grow stronger in our faith, and we'll find ourselves being shaped by the world around us, rather than being shaped by Christ.

Another way of looking at this is to remember that at our baptism we receive and respond to God's gift of grace and salvation through Jesus, but then we're called to go out and *live* the baptised life for the rest of our time here on earth.

Paul is urging the Christians in Philippi to take responsibility for their ongoing growth as disciples, and we too each have this responsibility in our relationship with God: in the words of The Passion Translation, "to continue to make this new life fully manifested". Through our simple, daily choices and decisions, our daily responses to people and situations, we can continue to grow in the new life that we have entered into, in and through Christ.

There's a really helpful picture that Peter gives us in his second letter, of building layer upon layer of Christ-like character (2 Peter 1:5-8):

"⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; ⁶ and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; ⁷ and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. ⁸ For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Of course, our growth in Christ probably isn't such a linear process, but it's that idea of being committed to continually build upon Christ's life in us that I think is so helpful in those words.

So, Paul calls us to continue to work out our salvation....."with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

The words "fear" and "trembling" are ones that again, may make us feel a bit uncomfortable - aren't these words that we associate more with how the people approached God in the Old Testament?

In the past 50 years or so, there has been a much greater emphasis in many expressions of the church given to God as our Father, the one with whom we can enjoy a close relationship as his children. And rightly so. And a few verses on in this chapter Paul does indeed call us children of God, for that is what we have become through Jesus, his Son. But we do still need to remember that our Heavenly Father is the Creator of all things, a Holy and powerful God, our Judge, the Divine Majesty. The words, fear and trembling, are not about being scared and terrified of God and shaking in our boots, but about awe and reverent obedience for the One

who deserves our praise and worship. And that means not taking our salvation for granted, but taking seriously God's call to tend to our souls, to look after that life that Jesus paid such a high price to win for us.

And perhaps that word, "trembling", reminds us also of the trembling that we can experience sometimes when the power of the Holy Spirit is at work in us; it reminds us that God hasn't left us alone to work out our salvation in our own strength, and trying to be better, but He Himself - the Holy Spirit or Spirit of Jesus - lives within us and works in us to choose God's way in our minds and hearts, and then to action those God-choices in how we behave. Yes, we need to play our part, we need to co-operate with the Lord (that is our responsibility) but He lives within us and is our Helper.

Again, I rather like the way that The Passion Translation puts it:

"Now you must continue to make this new life fully manifested as you live in the holy awe of God—which brings you trembling into his presence. ¹³ *God will continually revitalize you, implanting within you the passion to do what pleases him.*"

God invites us, day by day, to ask him to revitalise us, implanting within us the passion to do what pleases him.

As Paul continues, perhaps he had a particular concern for some relationship problems in the church at Philippi, urging them to "do everything without grumbling or arguing". Certainly we hear, later on, about two of the key women in the church who were having a hard time agreeing with one another. Grumbling and arguing poison individuals and communities, and are deeply unattractive to anyone looking in.

Instead, we're called to live out the reality of what we've already become in God's eyes, now that our life is in Jesus himself - to be "blameless and pure, children of God without fault."

It's every teenager's horror (I think?) to be told by a friend of their parents, "Don't you look like your mother / your father?!" And it's perhaps every adult's growing realisation that the older we become the more we recognise our parents in our behaviour and the things we hear ourselves saying! Well, as God's children, the wonderful news is that as we continue to work out our salvation with the help of the Holy Spirit within us, we will increasingly become more like our heavenly Father!

And as we do so, Paul imagines us "shining like stars in the universe as you hold firm to / or hold out the word of life" (verse 15-16).

I just love that picture - it's so simple and so beautiful. Maybe we've had the opportunity at some point to stay somewhere away from the orange skies of suburbia, and we've looked up into the depths of a clear night sky. And in the incredible darkness we've been awe-struck by the beauty of thousands upon thousands of stars. They're all there individually shining, but it is the way they light up the sky together that is so amazing. This, Paul says, is what we can be in and to the world around us, as we shine individually and even more powerfully, together. We may feel that not meeting together and not being able to work together affects our being able to shine as one, but in God's eyes we are no less one swathe of brilliant stars shining together.

"Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.

² See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the LORD rises upon you

and his glory appears over you.

³Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn." (Isaiah 60:1-3)

This was the vision of the prophet Isaiah for Israel and which we see fulfilled in the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. Jesus, the Light of the World, calls his disciples, God's children, to let our light shine before people that they may see our good deeds and praise our Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16). As we hold on to the word of life and hold out the word of life (that verse in Philippians can be translated both ways) we can bring light and hope in Christ to our world. And how our hurting, struggling world, our neighbours, friends, colleagues need that light so desperately in this time of immense darkness and pain. It's not that we offer this hope without also experiencing the pain and the darkness ourselves; rather, that within our own experience, we also know this light, and have this light to share.

As Paul draws this part of his letter together, he thinks about his fellow Christians in Philippi and imagines himself being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from their faith (verse 17). In the Old Testament sacrificial system, a drink offering was a small part of a larger sacrificial offering made to God - "a small thing which brought a major offering to completeness" (Alec Motyer, BST's The Message of Philippians). There is a sense of shared sacrifice in their service to the Lord, Paul's offering somehow helping to complete *theirs*. But their shared sacrifice is also accompanied by shared joy: "I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me" (verse 17-18). Joy is the wonderful golden thread running through this letter, which the Lord wants us to share in too, in our life together.

So, as I draw to a close, Paul would encourage us, as he encouraged his fellow Christians in Philippi to:

- hold in our hearts and minds the example of humility and obedience that our Lord Jesus has given us;
- and *therefore* in response, to continue to work out our salvation, together with the power of the Holy Spirit within us;
- to shine like stars in the darkness - to be and to hold out the light of Jesus to the world around us;
- and to know and share in the joy that God gives us as we serve him together.

Amen.