

## Sermon for Sunday, 14th February 2021

### Philippians 2:19-30 & John 3:22-30

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I wonder who inspires you? Who are the people you admire?

Role models. We all need them. People whose lives, and how they live, make us think "Yes, that's what I want to be like".

One of my early role models in the Christian faith was my RE teacher at secondary school. There was something about her calm, patient, gentle yet firm attitude that spoke to me, that attracted me. Indeed, I remember another teacher once commenting on her character as an example to follow. In a very quiet way she influenced me, she was a role model.

This morning, we're taking a look at two people who St Paul holds up as role-models, examples of Christian service and Christ-like attitude: Timothy and Epaphroditus. And as we take a look at these two men, we're going to see what we can learn from them for our Christian walk today.

Over the last few weeks as we've delved into Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, we have encountered as rich and deep theological thought as you'll find anywhere else in his writings. Sentence after sentence packed with deep meaning and insight.

Paul had been encouraging the Christians at Philippi in their relationships with one another to have the same attitude as that of Christ (Chapter 2:1-5): having the same love and humility, considering others better than yourselves, and looking not only to your own interests but to the interests of others. He'd been urging them to shine like stars because of their blameless and pure lives, and to continue working out their salvation.

And then Paul shifts into a different gear, in what (on the surface) reads like a sort of news update on his co-workers' travel plans. It wasn't unusual for Paul to include practical information like this in his letters, but it usually came at the end when he was giving people his final greetings. But here it is, bang in the middle of in-depth teaching. So, what's going on? Did Paul take a break from writing and when he got back had other things on his mind? Or was he needing a bit of a breather after all his deep theologising?

Perhaps it might help to try and imagine the possible circumstances in which Paul was writing his letter.

We remember that he was under imprisoned, very possibly house arrest, and therefore needed one or two people to assist him with practicalities. And these people happened to be Timothy and Epaphroditus. As he wrote, maybe they were coming in and out, delivering food and other things he needed, bringing companionship too. The letter is addressed from Paul and Timothy, and very possibly Timothy was acting as Paul's scribe. And so it's completely plausible that as Paul was thinking about Jesus's example of servanthood, his mind turned to those who were there with him. You can almost imagine him looking over at them and thinking "Yes, here are two people who have demonstrated exactly the kind of Christian service and character that I'm talking about." Paul is literally putting some flesh on the bones of his thinking with two people who embodied what he was writing about.

So, let's take a look, then, at Timothy and Epaphroditus.

We begin with **Timothy**.

Paul says that he hoped, in the Lord Jesus, to send Timothy to them soon, that he might be cheered when he received news about them. Paul wanted Timothy to spend some time with the church in Philippi so that he could then report back on their welfare and progress to Paul.

1) Paul says of Timothy: "I have no one else like him who will show genuine concern for your welfare. For everyone looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ" (vs 20).

When you read Paul's letter to the Philippians, as when you read any of his other letters, one thing that comes across so clearly is his love and affection for his fellow Christians, his deep concern for their spiritual welfare, to the point that he is prepared to give up his greatest desire (to die and be with Christ) in order to continue serving them. And in Timothy, Paul saw that same love and care for God's people, and for the Christians in Philippi. The word "concern" here is the same word used by Paul in 2 Corinthians 11:28-29, when he says, "Besides everything else, I face daily the *pressure* of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" There's a fine line, isn't there between anxiety and deep concern, but Paul would urge us like Timothy, to share in that real depth of care and concern for one another in Christ's body. And in these times that we're living through, what greater thing can we do for one another than show our care and concern for each other - through a phone call, prayer support, helping with some shopping etc. Simple acts of love for one another.

2) Paul continues, "For everyone looks out for their own interests, not the interests of Jesus Christ."

Paul has already mentioned earlier in his letter about some of those who were preaching the gospel out of self-interest. Maybe he had them in mind when he said this. But Timothy clearly wasn't one of those. His first concern was with the things that were on the heart of his Lord, and serving his Lord's interests. It was this same attitude that John the Baptist displayed, when some of his disciples got irritated that people were leaving him to follow Jesus: "He must become greater; I must become less", John replied. For John, as for Timothy, it wasn't about *himself* and *his* ministry and *his* following. It was all about Jesus, all about what served the best interests of Jesus.

As I was preparing this sermon, I felt moved by the Spirit to spend some time with the Lord, and to lay before him once again *my* self, *my* interests and desires, and to allow him to check my heart for any self-absorption, self-centred motives, to renew that commitment to serve the interests of Jesus before my own. Life isn't about me. It's about Jesus.

I wonder what that might mean for you and me today, this week?

3) "But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel" (vs 22).

Timothy had proved himself a faithful worker for Christ. He had shown perseverance and consistency. And an expression of that faithfulness was the way he'd served in his relationship with Paul - as a son with his father. Paul would have been thinking about the way sons learnt their father's trade, working alongside them and with them, watching, learning, assisting, and

serving the family business. It's not a concept that we generally have in our society now, apart perhaps from within something like farming. Timothy had been closely working and living alongside Paul, content to serve *with* him rather than go off on to pursue his own amazing individual ministry.

How are we showing faithfulness, perseverance, consistency in our work for the Lord? In our relationships with one another? Are we faithful in playing our part with and alongside others in the body of Christ? Can other people rely on us and be confident in us, as Paul was in Timothy?

So, Timothy demonstrated a deep and genuine concern for others. He put Christ's interests first. And he'd proved himself in his work for Christ.

As soon as Paul was more clear about his situation he was going to send Timothy to the church in Philippi. But before doing so, he needed to send someone else ahead of him with his letter. And the person he chose was Epaphroditus, our second role model.

### **Epaphroditus**

Epaphroditus was a member of the church of Philippi, one of their own, someone they would have known very well. It's the equivalent of asking us to think about our brothers and sisters in Christ in the All Saints fellowship, and whose character and pattern of living inspires us in our walk with Christ. We can look at a distance at famous Christian leaders and admire them, but far more powerful role models are those who we know personally and whose lifestyle we see up close.

They had sent Epaphroditus on a long journey (something in the region of 800 miles) to bring Paul a financial gift and to assist him in his imprisonment. But now Paul was eager to send him back, because they'd heard of their friend's life-threatening illness and because Epaphroditus longed to allay their fears for his well-being by being able to see them again.

Verses 25-30:

<sup>25</sup> "But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. <sup>26</sup> For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. <sup>27</sup> Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. <sup>28</sup> Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. <sup>29</sup> So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour people like him, <sup>30</sup> because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me."

1) Ephaphroditus had risked his life in Christ's service and had suffered, nearly dying. His example reminds us that as we serve the Lord, we are not immune to times of suffering and hardship, and the need to endure for the sake of Christ.

I can think of a number of friends who've served God with huge commitment and who, together with their families, have experienced suffering along the way. But even in the very worst of these situations, I saw the kind of endurance and faithfulness that Epaphroditus clearly

demonstrated, together with God's mercy, sustaining and strengthening in the midst of great trials and troubles.

Paul describes Epaphroditus not only as a brother and co-worker (high praise indeed), but as a fellow soldier. We may not feel very comfortable using military language to illustrate the Christian faith today, but we can imagine how Paul saw Epaphroditus as a companion on the spiritual battle field who had demonstrated loyalty and endurance, and who had also shared with him in battle-wounds and injuries along the way.

2) Epaphroditus, like Timothy, deeply cared about and loved his brothers and sisters in Christ.

"For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill" (vs 26).

That word "distressed" is the same word used to describe the Lord's anguish and troubled spirit as he was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. Epaphroditus, far from licking his own wounds and thinking about all that he'd been through, could think only of his friends back in Philippi, such was the depth of his love and care for them. No wonder Paul urged them to honour him!

We know very little else about this man. Unlike Timothy, he doesn't feature anywhere else in the New Testament, but Paul's short reflection on him reveals a man who was not frightened to risk his life for Christ, who had endured suffering in Christ's service, yet thought not of himself but his brothers and sisters in Christ.

Two role models: Timothy and Epaphroditus.

As we think about these two men, so highly commended by Paul, did you notice that there was nothing mentioned about their gifts and abilities, how good at preaching they were, what great evangelists, worship leaders, pastors etc they were? Paul really doesn't tell us anything about their achievements in that sense! No, it was all about the character of Christ that he saw in them, their commitment to serving Christ and their love for the people of God.

What tremendous encouragement we can take from that! Because in Christ's kingdom, what matters most is not our gifts and our ministries and how good we are at this or that for the Lord. What matters to him is how we live our lives for him; our character - having the same attitudes as that of Christ Jesus; our desire to serve him and to serve one another. That's what the Lord is most interested in. That is the greatest gift we can be in his kingdom.

As we think about these two role models and many others in the Bible; as we think about those we know today who inspire us because of their Christ-like attitude and character, be encouraged that we too can be role models of Christian character and service. For the same Holy Spirit is at work in us, helping us to become more and more like our Lord Jesus Christ.