

Sermon - Sunday, 14th March

Philippians 4:1-9 & John 14:23-27

Good morning!

This morning is the penultimate in our sermon series looking at Paul's letter to the Philippians. As we look back over the past few weeks, we've thought about Paul's affection for the Christians in Philippi and his absolute passion for their progress in faith; his encouragement to have the same mind and humility as Christ, and to follow in the example he and his fellow workers, Timothy and Ephaphroditus, had set; the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ compared to everything else (that treasure chest) and the need to keep pressing on towards the goal of knowing Christ Jesus and winning the prize that awaits us in heaven.

And now, as Paul begins to gather all his thoughts together, his concern is for the people of God to continue in the way that he has taught them, to be one with each other, and to know the God of peace in and with them.

The affection and pride that Paul feels for the Philippian Christians once again spills over onto the page of his letter:

"Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you for whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!"

All through this letter you get such a sense of Paul's wanting to guard and protect these precious people whom he'd invested so much of his heart and energy in! No wonder then, that news of a relationship difficulty (vs 2) prompts Paul to make a very personal appeal to two women in the church, Euodia and Syntyche.

Now, normally on Mothering Sunday, we'd have a couple of bible passages focusing on some great women of the bible. I promise that I didn't plan things so that this passage in Philippians about two women having a bust-up should fall on this particular day! But, whatever their disagreement, clearly these two women, who Paul refers to as his co-workers and who had contended with him for the gospel, were *indeed* godly women who held significant positions of influence in the church at Philippi.

Having just called the Christians to stand firm in the Lord, now he pleads with them to be "of the same mind in the Lord". "In the Lord..." is the key phrase here. It's that reminder that whatever differences we have (and we will have differences on many and all sorts of issues) what joins and binds and should keep us together is our shared life in and complete dependence upon the Lord. It always matters when Christians are out of relationship with one another because it affects the whole body of Christ. Disunity between two believers ripples out to the rest of the church family. Christ came to reconcile us in our relationship with him but also with one another, making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. These two women needed to be of one mind in the Lord who had died for them. If we are aware of difficulties in our relationships with others, particularly in the body of Christ, I appeal to you to reach out to one another as best as you can, so that you might be one in your Lord.

And so we move on to verses 4-7, perhaps some of the best known of this whole letter and the heart of this particular passage:

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!" This has to be one of the most joy-filled letters in the bible! What a testament to Paul's relationship with Christ that in the midst of such trouble he was so filled with the joy of the Lord. And that is his message to God's people in Philippi; joy is to be one of the trademarks of the Christian.

And Paul must have known first-hand how easy it is to experience anxiety and worry about our situations; he had every reason to feel anxious about his circumstances. And from that first-hand experience he encourages the Philippians and all Christians to go straight to God in prayer, with thanksgiving, with our requests. Coming to God in thanksgiving and gratitude helps us to recall and remember God's goodness, his character, who it is that we're praying to - our great God, whom we can trust with our circumstances and situations. It is in that place of confidence in Him that we can bring our requests to Him (remembering too, that the Lord is near). And Paul promises that as we pray, the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

So, what does this mean? What is this peace that Paul promises us we can experience?

The Greek word used is **eirene**, which comes from the verb **eiro**, which translates: to join or bind together that which has been separated. To reconcile..... Jesus promised this peace to his followers in our gospel reading from John: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you...do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:27) And it was that same peace (binding together that which had been separated) that he spoke out over the disciples when he came among them for the first time as their risen Lord: the message of reconciliation that they so desperately needed to hear from his lips: all is well between us; we are one again. The Complete Jewish Bible puts it this way: "Then God's *shalom*, passing all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds *safe in union with the Messiah Yeshua*."

The peace that Paul talks about, eirene or in Hebrew, Shalom, is first and foremost about being one with God - God is near, God is with me - and out of that comes the sense of an inner rest, well being, harmony within.

The Message translates this peace thus:

"a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the centre of your life.

I wonder if you can recall praying in the midst of difficult times and experiencing this shalom? It is truly wonderful when we feel this peace displacing worry.

But perhaps some of us are thinking to ourselves, "But it doesn't always work like that - sometimes, even when I've prayed, my feelings of worry and anxiety are just too overwhelming." Paul, in the previous chapter, acknowledged that he hadn't arrived at his goal yet of taking hold of all that Christ had taken hold of him for. He was still on a journey. And we are on a journey; unlike Jesus, we're not yet living in perfect, unbroken union with our heavenly Father, and experiencing that shalom that we long for. Until we forgiven and redeemed sinners are made perfect when we meet him in glory, we won't enjoy continual inner rest and won't always *feel* that peace that we all

long to experience. But as we continue to build our relationship with him and grow in trust and submission to him, we will experience greater times of shalom, *God with me*. And the more we grow in this peace, this sense of being at one with God in the times when we're not in acute need, the more, I believe, we will experience that same peace in the difficult times. And it is absolutely the Lord's desire to give us his peace in place of fear and worry and anxiety.

Paul promises that the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

And so to the final part of our passage, verses 8-9, and to the "whatevers", of which there are two "key" ones. The first whatever is to do with our thinking and the second whatever is about practising what we have learnt.

On the surface, it may look like this is a separate piece of teaching, but the final sentence "And the God of peace will be with you" links these "whatevers" back to the previous paragraph. Paul says that God is near, God will guard our hearts and minds with his peace when we seek him in prayer. But once we have that peace, that sense of being one with the Lord, keeping and retaining that peace in Christ Jesus is also dependent upon us making choices about our thought life and how we live for Christ Jesus.

First, our thought-life.

Paul says, "whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is admirable - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things". These are probably some of the earliest words of scripture that I really engaged with, as our headmistress in my junior school recited them to us at the end of term. In the words of The Message translation:

"I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse."

Our minds are so easily drawn away from the beautiful and the best to the ugly and the worst, to unbelief instead of faith. And once we let those thoughts take hold, our hearts then also become troubled and darkened: we lose our peace - that sense of being one with God. Why do we sometimes enjoy God's presence in a time of prayer at the beginning of the day, but as the day goes on we lose that sense of God's presence with us? So often, it's because we've allowed our minds to wander and ponder on things that aren't of Jesus - that irritating thing that person did that we keep going over in our mind, that word spoken by someone that hurt us (or indeed, that word that pops up within us about ourselves that is so negative). God is full of mercy, but if we spend our time dwelling on things in our thought-life which are negative, impure, etc then we cannot expect to retain the peace God gives us and that awareness of him being with us. We need to play our part in guarding our minds and hearts and the peace God gives us by actively choosing to think about what is good.

How about the other "whatever"?

"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."

As well as our thought life, we need also to put God's word and what the Lord has taught us and shown us into practice. In his letter to the Galatians, in Chapter 5, Paul urges his readers to "live by the Spirit" - and what does it look like to live by the Spirit? To be growing in the character of

Jesus Christ: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. When we live in the opposite spirit to these, we cannot expect to sense as clearly God residing in us and with us. As Jesus said, in John 14:23 "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them and we will come to them and *make our home with them.*"

We can't think and act in a way that is contrary to the very one in and through whom our peace is found, Jesus Christ, and not forfeit the peace, the shalom that comes through him alone. So, the "whatevers" of verses 8-9 are no afterthoughts of Paul's but essential to his teaching about finding and retaining God's peace.

We may want to take some time with those "whatevers" this week, asking God to reveal to us any patterns of thought or behaviour that affect our experiencing or retaining that shalom, God is with me, God is near.

Peace (shalom) and unity in our relationships with one another; peace (shalom) and oneness in our relationship with God, in the difficult times and the good times. Knowing God is with us, is near us. This is Paul's desire for the Christians in Philippi; this is God's desire for us today.

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank you that through your Son, our Saviour, Jesus, you have won us peace, your shalom in our relationship with you and with one another. Thank you that you desire that we should know you close to us, with us at all times and especially in times when we're anxious and worried. We pray for that peace that passes all understanding for ourselves and for others we are concerned about today. And we ask for your Spirit to strengthen us to think and live in those ways that help us remain in your love and peace. In Jesus name, Amen.