

## Philippians 1:1-11 Sermon during Covid

Today we begin a short series working through Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. During the next four weeks we will be working through the letter, but not covering all of it, so I'd strongly suggest that, as with all biblical letters, you make time to sit down and read the whole thing in one sitting, and then each week read the bits that Andrew or I don't speak on and think about what it means. That way, we'll work through the letter together and not miss anything important.

The apostle, Paul, who wrote this letter was a major character in the New Testament writing lots of letters and being the star of much of the book of Acts. The letter to the Philippian church was written whilst he was under house arrest in Rome and was written to a church where he had been before and where he knew people.

It is important that we remember that it is a letter rather than a theology textbook or a teaching manual. It was intended to be read out at the front of the church publicly and therefore what we are reading is a strange mixture of personal material meant for public consumption within the church in Philippi. It reacts to their situation as Paul understands it and has all the flourishes that letter-writing required back then as well. This includes a few introductory sentences at the top where it says who it's from and who it's to, and gives a greeting. After that, Paul generally gives thanks for the people he is writing to. It is these 'salutation and the thanksgiving' parts of the letter that we read today.

It's also important to know who the letter is addressed to as, like every letter, it only makes sense if you know who it is written to. Philippi was created as a Roman colony in 42BC following the wars which followed Julius Caesar's assassination. It was populated initially by veterans of these wars, as often happened when the Roman army rewarded its aging faithful veterans with lands. This means that the Roman tradition of worshipping the emperor was particularly strong within Philippi, and in fact, not to worship the emperor would have been seen as a subversive act.

When Paul first arrives in Philippi in Acts 16 there is no synagogue, which indicates there were less than ten male Jews in the city, and therefore the church which sprang up after Paul's visit would have been made up of non-Jewish converts. The Roman background of the letter gives it flavour, because when Jesus is referred to as 'Lord' or 'Saviour' this is taking a title used for the emperor and giving it to a crucified Jewish man. Similarly, when we read about the 'peace of God', there are echoes of the 'pax Romana,' and when Paul talks of citizenship of God's kingdom, he does so as a Roman citizen, knowing full well all the rights and privileges that this bought him. Clearly from the letter we hear that the church has been suffering, and this mirrors the pro-emperor suffering that Paul himself fell victim to in Philippi in Acts 16. This is a letter written to non-Jewish Christians in a deeply Roman setting from a Roman citizen who used to be a militant Jew but now is a Christian who treats Jesus as Lord instead of Caesar.

The letter starts by saying who it is from – Paul and Timothy. These two are servants (literally slaves in the Greek) of Jesus, the Messiah. Again, the Roman context means that Paul, a Roman citizen, accustomed to seeing slaves everywhere, marked himself out as being completely subject to the will of his master, Jesus. Effectively he was owned by Jesus. The letter is addressed to all the saints in Jesus in Philippi. This is a public letter to the church, not just to those who Paul knows. It then wishes them grace and peace from God. You'll notice that Jesus Christ is mentioned three times in only two verses. This sets the tone of the whole letter – it's all about Jesus.

Moving into the section of thanksgiving that Paul writes next, there is a section (verse 3-6) about the Philippian church's sharing in the work of the gospel from the first day until now. Then in verses 7 and 8, Paul talks about the present; how he feels about the people and longs for them. And then finally, in verses 9 to 11, Paul has the future in mind as he prays for their increase of love and knowledge, purity and blamelessness.

Verses 3 to 6 then, Paul remembers his friends in prayer. This doesn't just happen once a week, on some sort of rotation of prayer, but instead he is constantly praying for them and taking joy in it every time. Paul clearly loves the Philippian church and holds them dear to him. The reason is that they have been partners with him in sharing the Good News of Jesus. The word for 'sharing' is the Greek, 'Koinonia,' which is a word for partnership, but also fellowship and communion together. The church in Philippi have shared Paul's faith and they are one with him in belief but also in striving to tell others about the Gospel of Jesus. Paul is confident that the faith that the Philippians have will be sustained against the test of time and circumstance by God until the 'day of Jesus Christ' – the day when Jesus will return and the world will be complete.

In verses 7 and 8, there's a translation issue where either the Philippians hold Paul in their hearts, or Paul holds the Philippians in his heart – it really doesn't matter in the end. The important thing is that Paul feels this sense of joy and thanksgiving because of the Philippians sharing God's grace with him. Again, this isn't just some of them. Paul, whether he knows them personally or not has heard reports of the Philippian church's faithfulness in undergoing the same kind of sufferings and conflict that he did when he was there. This leaves him unashamedly emotional when he thinks of them – he talks of longing for them with a compassion that in the Greek is emotional and seated in his guts. Paul loves them deep in his being with unembarrassed emotion.

He moves on to pray for them. He is not content with their faith as it is, even though it is so impressive. Instead, he wants them to journey on with Jesus so that their love may overflow – a love which is unconditional and inexhaustible. He doesn't just want them to be more loving though, he wants their love to be connected to the source of love, and therefore they also need to know and see more of God. This knowledge of God will keep them and their love pure and blameless and prepare them to meet with Jesus when he comes again.

Maybe read back through the thanksgiving section, as if it was being read out in the front of church. It affirms the Philippian church but it also challenges them to keep partnering in communion with Paul and in service of Jesus Christ.

Each section we've looked at comes with a challenge for us, as a church and as individuals. Firstly, the Philippians were a joy to Paul because of their sharing in the Good News of Jesus. They were known for sharing in the Gospel, and it was plainly evident therefore that God was working in them and among them. For a moment, imagine what this would feel like in Menston (or wherever you are) – are we a church community which is known for sharing in the work of the good news? As an individual, am I active in that sharing and partnering? The work for Gospel (or Good News) is 'euangelion,' and given we are dealing with a Roman situation, it is a significant word. Euangelion was used for the announcement of the appearance or accession to the throne of the ruler, particularly of an emperor. This means that the Gospel of Jesus is the heraldic announcement that Jesus is Lord, and that God's Kingdom is come. Despite all the pressures, the Philippians were all partners in this work, and so must we be. To announce that Jesus has come and is Lord, is to announce that nothing else is in charge. It's not a message which we can keep to ourselves, but as partners in the gospel, we are also heralds of this Good News. The world has a new order and everyone needs to know about it.

Secondly, Paul's love for the Philippians is a challenge to us. As vicars, we are always told to pray that we would love our congregations and our parishes. It isn't something that happens naturally. Paul loved the Philippians and they held him in their hearts too. There is clearly love between all who share in the grace of God and the work of the Gospel. If you don't feel love for your fellow workers in the Good News of Jesus - not just the ones you like, but all of them - then you also need to pray for this love. Paul is clear in the way he keeps talking about 'all' the saints and his longing for you 'all' that he sees no divisions - love must be for all the church.

Thirdly, Paul prays for the spiritual journey of the Philippian church. We should pray for each other too, and maybe have the confidence to share with each other how that journey is going. Also, though, the point is being made that it is a journey. For Paul, there is no complete and finished Christian. There is more love and knowledge and insight which grows and grows until the day that Jesus comes and presents us to God pure and blameless. If we, deep down, accept a stagnant relationships with God where we do not seek more and more of Jesus, then we are missing out on all the blessings of this overflowing love and with a greater connection with the source of love, God himself. If that is you: pray, read your bible, talk to others about your faith and we can grow together and encourage each other as we seek to be partners in the Gospel.

Finally, Paul is Jesus' slave. For Paul, he is no longer his own. Jesus is his master and Paul serves as instructed and Jesus is his owner with the power of life and death over Paul. For Paul, a Roman citizen with rights and privileges, to give this up to become a slave would be unthinkable. Unless, that is, he had found the perfect master. It is this Jesus that Paul talks about throughout the letter, but it is this Jesus that implicitly he is inviting us to serve too. His slavery means that he no longer has the option of deciding when to serve Jesus, or to take some time off from serving Jesus. Instead, Paul is utterly at Jesus's command and disposal. This is the model of our relationship to Jesus. We don't serve him just by popping a video on the laptop once a week, or spending an hour at church. We are slaves to Jesus, every day, in everything we do, say and think. We are partners in announcing his coming and his Lordship. We are citizens of God's kingdom by being slaves of Christ, with the rights and privileges of the Kingdom of heaven, as those who have given up the rights and privileges of being masters over our own lives to serve Jesus. Let us be good and faithful slaves, great partners, and enthusiastic heralds of God's Good News, throughout our lives. Amen.