

17th Sunday after Trinity – 4th October 2020

Looking Ahead

‘ This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.’

So says St. Paul in his 3rd letter to the Philippians which we will consider tomorrow in our Zoom study group (details are on the newsletter)

I am going to concentrate exclusively on St. Paul today as I feel he has so much to say to us about our current situation.

Almost 2000 years ago, a man we know as Paul sat down in his prison cell, probably in Rome, and wrote a short letter to his friends in a place called Philippi. He was writing to thank them for their love and support. He is writing to encourage them. He is writing most of all because he can't be there to support them. Paul is in lockdown.

The Church in Philippi is small and young. They have no hierarchy, no Gospels and have many questions about the future. They are a small community facing hostility. Paul is telling them that in times of uncertainty they should centre themselves on Christ, their rock, their deep well.

Paul is experiencing darkness, but exhorts the Church to think about three themes which are very relevant to us in this pandemic.

Thanksgiving and appreciation. Giving thanks is the antidote to the suffering Paul is experiencing. What have we to be thankful for? A beautiful world, the support of family and friends, health? Maybe we don't have all of these but I'm sure we can all find examples of things for which to be thankful. Rather to be thankful than to find fault and criticise.

Paul says: ‘ I thank my God every time I remember you.’

The second theme is about setting and resetting our values on those of Christ. This is as Paul faces his death and comes to terms with his mortality. At the centre of both is knowing what is important. As we began to emerge from lockdown, although it seems now that we could be going into it again, do we have a different view of the world, have we reassessed what is important to us. Do we feel that things may never be quite the same again – do we believe there will be a ‘new normal’ in many ways? Have we gone back to the centre

of our faith? For some, they may have gone deeper, for others, they may have fallen away.

Paul argues that our lives should flow from our faith and that as Christians we should engage in public affairs, not retreat from them e.g the environment, human rights, climate change, pollution, refugees etc

Living out our faith will make us a more thankful and appreciative Church.

Paul also refers to the amount of fear that people experience in these situations. Certainly, the way in which we should open our Churches has been a challenge for many and meant a great deal of hard work, not the least for our steering committee here at St. John's who have done their utmost to reassure us that no stone has been left unturned to keep us safe in Church. In some ways, closure was easier than reopening!

There has been much praise for the way our Churches have adapted and in the Oxford Diocese, 95% of the parishes achieved an online presence which has been fruitful and creative, as well as providing for those who cannot access Zoom and online services.

Just looking through some recent editions of the Church Times, there were photographs of some very creative ways of coping with the opening of churches.

The Chinese vicar who was using chopsticks(here in England) to distribute the bread at the Eucharist; the bride who was carrying boxes of pizzas to her own wedding reception; the philanthropist Duchess of Bedford who said in the 1930s that 'the love of God leaves us no choice' (2 Cor 5 v14)but to stand up for the disadvantaged.

One photo was entitled: 'Joe Wicks not the Church has shown us how to flourish in Lockdown!'

There has inevitably been a feeling of loss, sadness and so on. We have missed the sacraments, the buildings, the music and the people and, while reopening has provided some of these things, coping with restricted numbers, lack of singing etc all have to be factored in. There are no right answers. There will be different ones for different places and, inevitably people respond differently.

However, the ability to come together to receive the Eucharist, meaning 'thankyou', is another way which will see us through together – even if, at the moment, it isn't quite as it was before.

Paul appeals for unity. This is another way through. Division will not help us.

He makes an appeal for 'a common mind' –

'Let the same mind be in you as in Christ Jesus.' Philippians 2 v 5

He is clear that the way to deal with conflicts is through humility

'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.'

We must learn the lesson of humility- the joy of offering for the common good. This is not easy when we have strongly held opinions, but we need to live a life worthy of Christ.

Division only weakens us and we can see that whatever our personal response e.g to Government measures such as wearing masks, using hand sanitiser, washing our hands, obeying the rule of 6 etc – these are far more effective, produce far better results, if carried out together than if we all act as individuals.

Paul says that our witness to the world must not be weakened by division.

As well as Covid 19, there are other enormous issues facing our World.

Caring for the environment; Equality and diversity of wealth and opportunities so they are shared equally irrespective of race, gender, background, sexuality etc and new technology – to be aware of ways it can serve the common good or undermine society in many different ways. We need global and local answers to all these concerns.

Looking again at the Epistle for today, Paul is emphasising again and again, the importance of finding our strength from the Centre, to keep going back to Christ to find the strength to carry on.

Lockdown has made us all tired – not knowing what the future holds, not being able to plan etc. Where are we going to find the strength for the Autumn? Where will our help come from?

Paul is now under arrest in Rome, facing a trial and possibly death. He doesn't underestimate his difficulties, but he finds the strength to look difficulties in the face. There are lots of ideas in the media to help us cope better, like eating comfort food, taking more exercise, sleeping well, wearing woolly socks and many more, which are all fine in their way, but Paul emphasises that

perseverance will also get us through, the perseverance that makes us go deeper into our faith; that shows us that Christ also knew what it was to be human; that He saved us through His Crucifixion and Resurrection. We cannot save ourselves.

The life of the Church should be celebrating all God has done for us. Paul is writing pastorally and simply and showing what it is to be a disciple. He has come to the end of his achievements but to be a true disciple he has to go on trying a little harder each time - demanding and costly. Like training for a race, it takes resilience which we shall need to find to cope with what lies ahead.

Bp. Steven finishes this section by quoting Psalm 121

'I lift up my eyes unto the hills: from where is my help to come?

My help comes from the Lord , the maker of heaven and earth.'

In Philippians 4, Paul's recommendation is to 'Rejoice in the Lord always.' It is a safeguard against depression. He was able to write these beautiful words from a prison cell – yet, when we have so many crises all around us, or likely to unfold in the weeks ahead, how can we be joyful? This is Paul's primary theme in his letter to the Philippians. He is not inviting us to rejoice at 'the bad stuff' but in spite of it. We know sin, injustice, disease, persecution all exist but we have to acknowledge that they do. The Psalms speak of pain but show us how to weave pain and joy together. Thanksgiving is the path to reignite joy. We can choose to be joyful, having faith in the goodness of God.

On the back page of the Church Times, a different person each week talks about their life and their faith and they are asked with whom they would choose to be locked up in a Church. This one particularly struck me:

'My Mum is a very prayerful woman- when I stop praying, she continues. When I go to check on her at 6am she's always praying. Her courage and her faith give me the strength to continue to worship God. I would choose to be locked up in a church with her.'

Amen

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