



Sunday, 18 June 2023

Philippians chapter 2.

Today we continue to look at Paul's letter sent to the church at Philippi, and we're in Philippians chapter 2. It will be useful if you have a sight of it. While you're finding it, a little bit of a recap on the history behind the letter.

Paul is in prison, almost certainly in Rome. Recently the church at Philippi had sent him financial support carried by a Philippian church member who'd shortly be returning home, so Paul's taking the opportunity to send a letter back to Philippi via this brother. The date's about AD62.

Paul loved this church at Philippi. And he really appreciated their love for him. It was after all the site of his first church plant in Europe. But it had been a difficult place for him to work. He'd been badly beaten and put in prison there, and afterwards politely (but undoubtedly firmly) asked to leave by the city's administration. But he had left behind an infant church.

As with many cities, Philippi was multi-cultural, but at this time in it's history it was basically a retirement city for the Roman military. We're used to hearing of 'retirement villages' today. Well this was a city size one, although not all its inhabitants had initially been willing citizens. A number had been 'relocated' from Rome after a civil war in the Roman Empire. But it was still proud of its Roman heritage even though it was situated in today's modern northern Greece, around ten miles inland from the Aegean Sea.

With Paul and Silas getting effectively kicked out of Philippi before they could do too much to establish the church, this church had had to hit the ground running. But one commentator - F. F. Bruce - suggests that from the language of the book of Acts, Luke may well have remained in Philippi for a while after Paul and the others were moved on - but that's only conjecture.

As I've said, we know Paul loved this church and he wanted their good. So when he writes to them he wants to both encourage them and warn about stuff he sees as problems and deficiencies he's heard are affecting them.

And so we come to chapter two - although please remember this was (is!) a continuous letter. Chapter demarcations were only introduced to the Bible in the 13th or 14th century AD, so this chapter is at one with chapter 1 and also the following chapters. And those who created the chapter divisions didn't always do it in the best way that the content should have demanded.

So chapter 1, verse 27 says this: *"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being*



frightened in any way by those who oppose you.”

And these themes of correct Christian behaviour and unity continue through the artificial chapter break into chapter 2, which we'll now read, - and while not all English versions start this chapter with, "Therefore", it's a totally logical translation. So lets read Philippians ch.2.

Therefore... if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

Who... being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

*And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - **even** death on a cross!*

Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

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 in order to fulfil his good purpose.

Do everything without grumbling or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour in vain. But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I also may



be cheered when I receive news about you. 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. 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. I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. And I'm confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon.

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. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. 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. 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. So then, welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour people like him, 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.

I'll not be covering the whole chapter this morning, but I read to the end of it because I wanted you to get a feel for Paul the man, not just Paul the theologian. This guy cares for this church, and people in general. He appreciates them. He loves them. So what he seeks to teach them wells up from inside him as a deep desire for their good. He's not so much trying to 'put them right' as 'encourage them to be better' by the teaching he's giving them. And I hope I can emulate him in that.

And his main thrust at the beginning of chapter 2 is to say, "Be like Jesus". He's pinning up a picture of the Son of God, Jesus the Christ, and saying - emulate Him.

A little while back I was going into a school to help children with their reading. We had a number of books we regularly gave the children to read, and one was about the early years of Lewis Hamilton's life. It was about him growing up and getting into go karting and his early hardship days. And I learn a lot about him as I listened to the kids reading. For a start, I learnt he had a hero, Ayrton Senna, who was at the time the world champion driver.

I'm not sure if he had a picture of his hero on his bedroom wall, but I wouldn't be surprised if he did. I *do* know that from an early age he was telling people *ad nauseam* that he was going to be just like his hero and be the world champion. The rest, as they say, is history.

And I tell you that story because what I see Paul doing at the beginning this chapter is to powerfully encourage the church at Philippi to make his hero -



Jesus - their hero - and to do their level best to emulate *Him*.

But he starts with a plea for unity of purpose, not as in a club with the same interests, but as the body of Christ on earth. Did you notice that in 1:27 he talked of, "standing firm in the one Spirit" and in 2:1 of the, "common sharing in the Spirit".

One commentator says of Paul's exhortations to them, "It's not difficult to be a Christian - it's impossible!". So before I go further I want to say quite clearly, if you haven't accepted Jesus as your Saviour and Lord, everything Paul encourages you to be and do - you just can't - full stop. You need God the Holy Spirit working into you the capability to be like Jesus in the way that Paul talks about here. And to do that, you need to join the family. And I'm not talking about joining this church, or any church. I'm talking about God's family and being born again by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But there is *also* an element in this that *is* down to us. And Paul is shouting that fact out to this church in these verses. He's talking about *our* unity and fellowship. Count up the number of times he says, "one" in this passage. Not one individually - but everybody being one together. It Darren was up here speaking this morning you'd undoubtedly hear him use the word community a few times. Outside of this place they'd possibly call it teamwork.

I'm not particularly into football. Sorry you soccer fans. But I do enjoy watching rugby union. And in rugby there's a play called 'the scrum' where packs of eight players unite into one mass with the intent of getting the ball to pass to other team members. Each player in the scrum has a role, but they are all united in the same sweaty, grunting, toiling purpose. *That's* what Paul's calling for here. And one commentator's said that with the powerful language he uses, Paul doesn't just want them to think about unity, he wants them to *feel* it as well.

"If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from His love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus".

And then - in most modern imprints of the Bible anyway - you should see a change in the way the text of verses 6 to 11 are laid out. And there's a reason for that.

Commentators have spilt more ink over things they've said about these



verses than most, but there's one thing that has their universal agreement. It's that these verses constitute a single example of a very early "hymn" - sometimes called 'the Christ-hymn' - of the early church.

Now it may, or may not, be of Paul's own authorship, and some scholars speculate if the 'hymn' we have recorded here is in its original form anyway or an adaption of an earlier hymn. I suppose, a bit like the modified version of Amazing Grace we sometimes sing that's based on the John Newton original. But none of that matter's to the content we have in our Bibles.

But before he gives us this early hymn, he gives us an instruction: "In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus". So the obvious question is how? How do we find out what Jesus mindset was?

And that's why we have the Bible. It's an instruction manual from God that people have died to put into our hands in our own language, and for which we should say 'thank you' every time we open it. That - plus the instruction and empowerment of God the Holy Spirit. And if we want to know what that empowering work of the Holy Spirit looks like, then we go to such verses as Galatians 5:22 & 23 and read, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.", etc. Or similarly, for what the work of the Holy Spirit is like in acts of service, you can go to 1 Corinthians ch.12. But Paul doesn't take us there now. Because having told us we should humbly value others above ourselves and not look to our own interests but each others, he simply says, 'look at Jesus'.

Someone's said that humility is a slippery word that defies definition. Be that as it may, we all know what it looks like, and we can all spot what its opposite looks like too. You've probably hear the expression, "I can't hear what you're saying because your actions are shouting louder than your words". That should never be able to be said about us, and it certainly couldn't be levelled at Jesus.

But perhaps I need t stop for a second and ask a question, or I might be taking too much for granted. I just said, "we all know what humility looks like" - but do we? Tell you what - why don't you get into small groups of three to five and discuss that question for a couple of minute - only a few minutes - and then we'll come back together again. So the question is - "What does humility look like?" Please quickly turn around to those near to you and discuss and then we'll get back together again.

DISCUSS / ANSWERS.

I wasn't quite sure where to start - so I went for a dictionary definition, and found synonyms and their opposites. So synonyms were such things as



modesty, diffidence or unpretentiousness, and the lack of pride. But some of the opposites were easier to recognise: pride, vanity, superiority, arrogance, disdain, presumption, conceit, pomposity, pretentiousness, snobbishness, haughtiness, and superciliousness.

One other thing. Mark Green of LICC wrote recently, "Humility - do you *really* want it?" I hope we're saying "Yes Lord, but please help me." to that.

But here in this chapter Paul doesn't give us a dictionary definition of humility. He gives us the awesome picture of Jesus in this early church hymn. And it starts before the beginning of time.

One of the big - how shall I say - 'pluses' we find in the argument made for the hypothesis of evolution is the vastness of even the known universe. If you ever want to feel small, find yourselves one of those maps of know space that expands from our own small galaxy and goes on seemingly forever through light-year after light-year. I suppose in one sense God has hidden behind that vastness, because He's asking of us to believe in Him, not just to rely on fact. So Hebrews 11:3 says this: "*By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.*"

And then we come to the first three verses of John's Gospel: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Him all things were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made.*" We can argue endlessly about the 'how' of creation, but we won't get too far because we haven't got enough information. But those who believe in the awesome living God can talk about the 'Who' of creation. And John starts his record of the life of Jesus with the words, "*Through **Him** all things were made; without **Him** nothing was made that has been made*".

So to this Philippian church Paul quotes this early hymn which says of our awesome creator, "*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage*".

Something that sometimes brings a smile to my face is senior national figures, usually in some foreign army, having so much bling and gongs hanging off their chests it's a wonder they haven't got back ache. But Jesus, co-equally divine with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the creator God, did not parade his identity. Instead, it goes on to say, "*rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant,*".

And this is something Jesus *did* demonstrate. The Bible's got a lot of acting out of truth. It was the modus operandi of a lot of the OT prophets. And in John Ch.13 Jesus did so as well. Jesus and his inner circle of disciples had all



turned up in a room for a celebratory meal, but they'd walking in after a dusty journey and there was no servant around to wash their feet. And *none* of the disciples were going to lower *themselves* to do this menial job. Except - Jesus did just that. And afterwards, He said this:

"Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." Of course today we live a long way away both from the culture and the time of this situation. But the principals of Jesus teaching and example are still before us - which is what Paul is saying to this church in this letter.

But Paul goes on to say, *"...being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - **even** death on a cross!*

I guess we're all familiar with the 'Christmas story' whatever time in the year it actually occurred. It's the nuts and bolts description of how God entered His own creation. But why did He do it? Why become human?

Part of the answer to that is that the visible world isn't the only one. And in the battle between good and evil taking place in both the visible and invisible worlds, certain truths can't be ignored. One is that right at the beginning, humanity, the creature, designed with free will, stuck two fingers up to God its Creator, and rebelled against Him. In consequence it earned itself eternal, irrevocable judgement. Irrevocable, that is, unless some human being who *didn't* rebel against God and hadn't got, so to speak, the DNA of rebellion in them - or have Sin in them as the Bible puts it - could demonstrate total obedience - and then, as a innocent person - take onto themselves the curse of the damnation earned by Sin. They'd have to be perfect - and they'd have to be willing to die for everybody else's Sin. And what I have just done... is introduce you to Jesus.

And this hymn adds, *"even death on a cross!"*. Some of you have heard me talk about execution by crucifixion before. I'm not repeating that now. For a start I haven't got time. But it was a terrible death; so much so that a Roman citizen wouldn't get crucified. It was a death reserved for the lowest of the low, which in Roman parlance was anyone of another nationality who'd offended against the Roman Empire.

But Paul isn't necessarily drawing attention to the terribleness of the form of execution 'per se'. He probably has in mind what he's written to the Galatian church in Galatians 3:13: 'But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon



himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." (That's the NLT version by the way). And he's quoting Deuteronomy Ch.21 where it says God has cursed anyone hung on a tree. Paul's drawing attention to the fact that Jesus took the curse of our wrongdoing onto Himself as part of the dying in our place.

Leaving my notes for a minute: you have probably heard me say at times, we look at the prayers of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and we see the anguish of what He knew he was going to face, and we think 'terrible crucifixion death'. Yes, that. But He knew, He knew that the big thing He was going to suffer was the separation from The Father, as He hung on the cross; separated so we needn't be separated any more.

And Paul says, "*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus*". As this same awesomely supreme Creator God who became the lowest of the low to raise us to the heights of eternity.

And in case you might be thinking, OK, but that attitude is just Paul's take on life, hear what the Lord Jesus Christ Himself says in Matthew 10:38, "*Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me*". And in Mark 8:34 it says - *Then He (that's Jesus) called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me"*. And in Luke 9:23 it says, "*Then He said to them all: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me."*" Do you think He was trying to make a point?

I'm looking at the clock and I'm running out of time. But I want to finish on a high - the same high that this earliest of hymns finishes on.

Paul uses this hymn to encourage us to think like Jesus thought in His self abasement, and I trust I've reflected that this morning. But now the hymn skyrockets, and I really can't do this part of it justice in just the few minutes I now have this morning. A little while ago I went on a day's conference on the ascension of Jesus back to heaven after the resurrection, and even that didn't scratch the surface. But Paul is saying in a nutshell that Jesus didn't just return to the exalted position he had before coming to earth to save us, he went back to a massive hero's welcome in heaven and a higher position of glory even above the exalted status He had before. And at this point I need a drum roll... {DRUM ROLL}

Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.



And just maybe I might now need to correct a misunderstanding of folklore Christianity. You've probably heard people talk about 'Jesus being with them', or even, 'Jesus living in them'. Sorry. Not completely true. Jesus is our advocate in Heaven, where this chapter tells us He is - therefore not *in* us or *with* us on earth *except* via the Holy Spirit. In Romans 8:34 Paul says again that Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father where He's interceding for us. And in Colossians 3:1 Paul once again talks of Christ sat at the right hand of God. But most significantly perhaps is the record we have in Stephen's statement in Acts Ch.7 where, just as he's about to be stoned to death, he says he has a vision of heaven opened with Jesus standing at the right hand of God the Father.

But while Jesus Himself made it clear He was leaving us, He also said that He was *not* leaving us alone. It is God the Holy Spirit who is with and in and around those who have Jesus Christ as their Saviour as His advocate with us on earth.

But then - and I really don't know how you put this together conceptually - Paul tells us in Ephesians chapter 2:4-7 that because of His great love for us God made us alive with Christ and raised *us up* with Christ and *seated us with Him* in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. And the text doesn't seem to be talking about sometime in the future, but a now. Work that one out.

But while we can't understand the hows of it, we can accept that we who have Jesus as our Saviour are blessed by God in the here-and-now, and will be throughout eternity.

I need to close. So having looked at one of the earliest Christian hymns ever, we're now going to close our service with a relatively modern one based on the same themes. So let's now sing - SoF 32 - At the name of Jesus. And this is a hymn you can give welly to.

Granville Richards