

Advent 3 2021

This Sunday I am going to preach not from our Gospel but from the first reading from Chapter 4 of Paul's Epistle to the Philippians. There's a reason for this. Some of you might recall that back in the mists of time before we'd ever heard that word 'COVID' I decided to preach a series of sermons from this Epistle at four consecutive Evensongs here at Hailey.

Four sermons makes sense because the Letter is 4 chapters long. The series was planned for the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020. In the event I preached on Chapter 1 in October and Chapter 2 in November; then there was a break for Christmas and I resumed with Chapter 3 in March. The final sermon on Chapter 4 planned for 5th April 2020. Well, we all know what happened on 23rd March, and one of its consequences was that we never got to Philippians Chapter 4.

But, as if it were a lesson in patient waiting, here we are nearly two years later and here it is in the lectionary for the 3rd Sunday in Advent, the Sunday known as 'Gaudete Sunday' – the Sunday with the pink candle that traditionally signalled a move away from reflecting on our sin and brokenness, taking a break from penitential disciplines such as fasting, and beginning to anticipate the sheer joy of the coming of Christmas. As I am sure you know, 'Gaudete' is Latin for the instruction to Rejoice. So, you will immediately see the connection with the Philippians reading.

I'm going to say a few things about the Letter to the Philippians based on some of those sermons from two years just to set the scene; and then offer some brief reflections for where we are now.

First – Philippians is the most easy to read of Paul's letters, and I recommend that you read it through yourself when you have an hour or so to spare.

The letter is written to a Christian community in Philippi in Eastern Greece. Paul had founded this community himself; it first met in first the home of Lydia (Acts 16). From the way he writes, it's obvious that he has

a real affection for this particular church; and that's important because his relationships with the other churches that he wrote to were tricky and sometimes fractious for all sorts of reasons. Yet this community felt like home to him, and he is clearly missing his old friends dreadfully.

Paul is under some sort of imprisonment, so the letter either dates from in the 50s AD when he was in gaol in Caesarea, or from the 60s, when he was under house arrest in Rome. I favour the later date because the letter reads like a farewell. Paul is hoping to be released and to be able to return to these friends but he is also facing the strong possibility that this isn't going to happen.

Paul is thought to have died in Rome in about AD 64, beheaded by Nero after the fire when there was a great purge of Christians. You will recall that Nero is said to have fiddled while Rome burned. He was certainly very good at finding scapegoats for his shambolic government. Like so many others, it seems that Paul was an innocent casualty of agendas pursued by a political elite which had lost its moral compass.

As we read the letter, we get a picture of a man whose world appears to be crashing around him. His influence seems to be waning as others try and supplant him; even though he was able to receive local visitors while under house arrest, he is cut off from his old friends, worried about his fledgling churches, and staring death in the face; yet he continues to rejoice. Indeed, the words 'joy' and 'rejoice' occur more in this short letter than anywhere else in Paul's correspondence.

This invites us to consider the nature of Christian joy. For Paul, joy is second only to love as a fruit of the Spirit. We tend to think of joy as an emotion and that is partly true, but the New Testament talks about it primarily as an attitude to life. The sort of attitude that looks at a situation and finds the good in it, not denying the challenge and suffering that may be involved, but seeing it as part of a bigger story in which,

despite what are often appearances to the contrary, God is good, God is victorious, and we are not victims.

This requires some self-discipline and resolve. Here the OT story of Job is instructive. You will recall that Job went through horrible suffering even though he was an innocent man. His friends said, he must be being punished for some unknown sin and should own up to it; his wife was more radical – she told him to ‘Curse God and die!’ But Job did neither; he lamented his lot, he questioned God, but he never lost faith in him or in himself, and in the midst of his suffering he asserted ‘I know that my Redeemer liveth! And that I shall see God on my side’

This is what the Bible means by joy. It’s a quality of mind, grounded in faith, and expressed as an act of will. If you look at verse 4 – the first verse of our reading, you’ll notice the phrase ‘I will’. I am in a place of darkness and uncertainty; I don’t know the outcome, but I know whom I believe and so I choose to rejoice in both him and the situation. And in doing so I find that I can better face what life throws at me. Just a few verses later Paul writes this:

I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty.
In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.
I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

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I hope it is now obvious to you that Paul’s words written 2,000 years ago and many miles away are words for us today. We are not out of the woods yet with the pandemic, in fact we are entering a new worrying phase; we have endured a long period of restricted contact with loved-ones; there are parts of our society that seem to have lost their moral compass; the world seems fraught with upheaval and population movement; and – whatever our politics – none of us can be happy with

the way we are currently being governed. But that is not so different from Paul's situation; and even more so the situation into which Jesus was born that first Christmas.

So, I invite you to take those verses from our reading home with you and stick them up somewhere or incorporate them into a painting or a piece of calligraphy or stitch-craft. Let them be your watchword for the coming year; repeat them, pray them, live them.

I'm going to finish by reading those verses followed by the final verses of the letter, which ends shortly afterwards, and in which Paul says what was probably his last goodbye.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The friends who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's household.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.