

Philippians 4. 1-9. Ebenezer. 5 February 2012.

Our reading for tonight comes then from Philippians chapter 4, commencing at verse 1...

Therefore, my brethren, beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, thus stand firm in the Lord, beloved.

I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true yoke-fellow, help these women, who have contended alongside me in the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is near.

Do not be anxious 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, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are commendable, if anything is excellent, if anything is praiseworthy, consider these things.

Whatever you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do these things. And the God of peace shall be with you.

The first word of our reading for this evening, 'Therefore', alerts us to the fact that it is connected to – indeed, rests upon – the section which went before.

Given, Paul is saying, that you enjoy heavenly citizenship¹ (that you form a colony of heaven), that you await such a Saviour, and that you entertain such a hope, then 'stand firm in the Lord'.

And we can hardly miss the threefold 'in the Lord' sprinkled through verses 1 to 4.² And, in one sense, the three expressions, 'stand firm in the Lord', 'be of the same mind in the Lord', and 'rejoice in the Lord' summarise and pull together the teaching of the previous three chapters ... chapter 1 more or less closing with the words, 'that you stand firm in one spirit',³ chapter 2 more or less opening with the words, 'being of the same mind',⁴ and chapter 3 commencing with the words, 'rejoice in the Lord'.⁵

But our reading for this evening draws attention very much to the believer's mind, referring as it does to a united mind in verse 2, a guarded mind in verse 7, and a focused mind in verse 8.

In the opening section of his letter, Paul had assured the Philippian Christians, before God, of his warm feelings for them, telling them that he 'had them in his heart' and that he 'longed (he 'yearned') for them' with the very 'affection of Christ Jesus'.⁶ Now, as he draws near to the close of his letter he again stresses the intensity of his love for them. Indeed, it seems that he was scarcely able to find words adequate to express his feelings for those he regarded as his joy in the present and his garland of victory in the future⁷ ... whom he wants to see, not standing still – perish the thought⁸ – but standing firm ... holding their ground in the face of the fierce opposition which they were encountering.⁹

But the special and tender place which the Philippians had in Paul's heart must have made what he needs to say next all the more painful to him.

That the apostle regarded it necessary to name both Euodia and Syntyche in a letter clearly meant to be read, not only to the overseers and deacons, but to the whole assembly, conveys some idea of how serious he regarded their disagreement. He had previously made it clear to 'the saints ... at Philippi' that, such was his love for them that he was willing, on the one hand, to go on living for them, even if that meant him foregoing heaven for a time,¹⁰ and, on the other hand, to die for them if that might advantage them in any way.¹¹

How horrified he must have been therefore to learn that the spiritual harmony and wellbeing of the assembly was being threatened and endangered by the way in which these two dear and highly valued sisters were now at loggerheads with each other. Hence, his very public appeal to them. And it is hard to imagine the bombshell in the meeting when this part of his letter was read out.

Throughout the earlier part of the letter there had been a veritable rash of such expressions as 'all the saints',¹² 'you all',¹³ 'of one accord',¹⁴ 'of one mind',¹⁵ 'being like-minded',¹⁶ and so on – expressions which occur some 20 times in all. Perhaps hearing such phrases so often had made these sisters feel rather uncomfortable ... perhaps they had even come to suspect that somehow Paul had learned of their personal differences. If so, now they knew!

And we do well to note that the apostle not only avoids taking sides, or further embarrassing the sisters by mentioning any details of what had put their noses out of joint, but that he pleads with each separately and personally (as if face to face), imploring them – as if he said, 'please, Eoudia ... please Syntyche' – and that he is quick to recall¹⁷ the way in which (borrowing language taken from the Greek games) they had both previously 'striven' together with him and his co-workers in the cause of the gospel – then battling side by side against a common foe.

How sad that these two sisters who had once been such a help to Paul should now need help to sort out their own differences. But he could foresee that this would prove to be the case ... that the trouble between them was so serious that he must summon the aid of a third party to lend a hand in resolving it. And I say 'lend a hand' deliberately, because the word translated 'help' here is the same as that used by Luke to describe the 'help' which Peter and Andrew called for from their partners James and John when they were unable to cope alone with a miraculous catch of fish.¹⁸

Clearly the identity of the brother 'asked' (a warm, friendly word) to lend a hand was obvious to Paul, to the man himself, to Euodia and Syntyche, and to the whole assembly. But, alas for the more curious among us, it is not known to us ... or, I can tell you, to the commentators, who, between them, have suggested almost every male in the New Testament except our Lord Jesus, the apostle Paul, and Judas Iscariot!

In that the word translated 'true' means 'real and genuine', some have suggested that the following word (translated 'yoke-fellow') was in fact a proper name (Sunzugos, which itself means 'yoke-fellow'), and that the apostle is making a play on his name ... 'I ask you, rightly called, properly named, Yokefellow, help these women'. Such a word play would certainly not be out of the question, coming from the man who once wrote to Philemon concerning Onesimus (whose name meant 'profitable' or 'useful'), 'Formerly he was unprofitable (useless) to you, but now he is indeed profitable (useful) to you and to me'.¹⁹

So, maybe the name of the brother called in to lend a helping hand to these sisters was Sunzugos – but, in the end, we do not know.

Nor, of course, do we know the names of those, who along with Clement (which was a common Roman name), Euodia and Syntyche, engaged with Paul in conflict for the gospel. Quite possibly, if they were (as many in the assembly no doubt were) colonists of Rome, their names would have been enrolled in Rome. But that mattered nothing compared to what Paul says of them ... namely, that, although their names are not given in his letter,²⁰ their names are written in 'the book of life' – or, as our Lord once expressed it, 'written in heaven'²¹ (when telling His disciples that what mattered was not so much the power of His name on earth, but the presence of their names in heaven) ... that the names of Paul's fellow-workers are 'written in heaven' – where their true citizenship lay.²²

In the following verses (verses 4 to 6), Paul expresses his desire that the saints at Philippi be a joyful, gentle, care-free, prayerful and thankful company.

First, 'rejoice', he says, 'in the Lord always', adding, in effect, 'I have said it once, and I will say it a second time – rejoice' – the whole of this letter very much radiating, I note, with joy. I note also the addition – compared with the first verse of chapter 3 – of the word 'always' ... which he adds similarly in the final chapter of his first letter to another persecuted Macedonian church, namely that of the Thessalonians.²³

Yes, Paul says, 'rejoice', even when all around you is, humanly speaking, difficult, dark and dreary. And the man who, on his first visit to Philippi as an ambassador for Christ, had been heard 'praying and singing hymns to God' with his feet fastened in the stocks of the inner prison,²⁴ had every right to call on the believers there to 'rejoice in the Lord' too – as we shall see shortly, to 'do' what they had heard of him, and had seen of him.²⁵ Paul could claim elsewhere that, even if 'sorrowful' on account of the bleakest of circumstances, 'yet' he was 'always rejoicing'.²⁶

'Rejoice', I note he says – repeating what he had said back in the first verse in chapter 3 – '*in the Lord*', words which remind me of the closing section of the song of Habakkuk ... 'Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice *in the Lord*; I will take joy in the God of my salvation'.²⁷

Alas for me, I so soon take my eyes off the Lord, fail to spend time in communion with Him, and thereby lose my joy in Him.

At this point, Paul switches the spotlight from the joy which the Christian should experience within in verse 4 to two things which he or she should 'make known' to others in verses 5 and 6 ... first, 'your gentleness to all men' – to all around, that is, and, second, 'your requests to God' ... if you like, the one horizontally, and the other vertically.

The word rendered 'gentleness' is said to be one of the most difficult Greek words to translate. In particular, it carries the idea of something better than strict justice – of not insisting on the letter of the law – of being willing to give way graciously and to yield one's rights. This quality of 'yieldingness' can be seen in action in the lives of two of the patriarchs; namely, Abraham in Genesis 13, and Isaac in Genesis 26. But it is a quality which Paul knew to have marked our Lord Himself,²⁸ and which, without naming it, Paul has shown exemplified supremely in Him ... in our Lord Jesus ... back in the early section of chapter 2.²⁹

Not insisting on looking after your own interests ... being considerate, and ever ready to waive your own rights for the sake of others³⁰ ... are you listening, Euodia and Syntyche?

This is asking a lot, they – and others – may have responded. Ah, but then, Paul adds, 'the Lord is near'. Although I have to confess that I am unsure which of two meanings these words were – and are – meant to convey ... whether the 'nearness' has to do with time or place ... that is, whether it has to do with the immanence of our Lord's return – which, according to the close of the previous chapter, we should all be eagerly awaiting³¹ – or with His proximity to us now – beside us, at our elbow, if you like.

In favour of the first (a reference to our Lord's return), we can point to the Aramaic equivalent, 'Maran-atha', in all likelihood meaning 'Our Lord, come'.³² And certainly, if Paul's expression, 'the Lord is near' does point to the hope of the Christian that He could come at any moment, it would underline the fact that nothing of earth has any lasting value and that the believer can therefore both afford to hold such lightly and afford to waive his personal rights.

In favour of the second – that the expression, 'the Lord is near' refers rather to His being present with us now – we can point to several similar expressions in the Book of the Psalms, each having this meaning. For example, Psalm 119 verse 151: 'you are near, O Lord, and all your commandments are true'.³³ In which case, the apostle's point is that the believer can afford to waive his rights and to leave the matter with the Lord because the Lord is nearby and is witness to all that has happened.

As far as I am concerned both interpretations are wonderfully true. The Lord, who will one day come again *for us*, is here and now present *with us*. And an appreciation of either will motivate me, when it comes to personal matters, to give way graciously and to yield my own rights.

But I am to make known, not only my 'yieldingness' to men, but my 'requests' to God.

'And why, Paul?' Because, as he says, doing so is the antidote to corroding cares and the doorway to God's perfect peace.

'Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God'. In other words, 'The way to be care-full for nothing is to be prayerful for everything'.

Naturally speaking, both the apostle and the Philippians were exposed to many things to worry about and to fret over. For his part, he was in prison, with martyrdom (from a human point of view) still a very real possibility. For their part, they were engaged in the same conflict as he was, facing considerable opposition and suffering 'on behalf of Christ'.³⁴

He certainly does not wish his readers – then or now – to be careless when serving God ... in that case, proper care and concern is to be commended.³⁵ Yet he would wish them to be 'care-less' as far as distracting anxiety about the affairs of life is concerned.

Indeed, as you know, the New Testament prescribes a threefold antidote to anxious care and worry. The first comes from the lips of our Lord Himself in the so-called Sermon on the Mount. "Do not be anxious", the Saviour declared, "saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" For the Gentiles seek after *all these things*, and your heavenly Father knows that you need *all these things*.³⁶

That God knows our needs is therefore the first ingredient.

The third ingredient is supplied by the apostle Peter; 'Casting all your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you'.³⁷ Earlier in his letter, Peter had quoted from Isaiah 53, 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way', which verse continues, as Peter knew well, 'and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all'. And was He (our Lord Jesus) able to carry – to bear – the weight of all the iniquities which God laid on Him? Oh, yes – most certainly He was! And I note that Peter therefore prefixed his quote from Isaiah 53 with the words, 'who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree'.³⁸ Now Peter insists that his persecuted and suffering readers cast their anxieties where their iniquities were once laid! 'On Him!' And this, Peter says, 'because He cares for you' – literally, 'because it matters to Him about you'.

That God cares for us is therefore the third ingredient. Paul supplies the second in our reading for this evening ... in nothing worry; in everything pray.

And it is hardly surprising that Paul should have so much to say about prayer in his letter to the Philippians. For the assembly had been born in an atmosphere of prayer. Remember how, in Acts 16, Luke twice speaks of the 'place of prayer' – once in connection with the conversion of Lydia, and once in connection with the deliverance of the girl fortune-teller from occult powers ... and then of the jailer's conversion following Paul and Silas's midnight prayers and praises.

And don't miss Paul's expression 'with thanksgiving'. For, when it comes to anxiety, many of us suffer from short-term memories. We become so concerned with our perceived problems in the present and the future that we lose sight of the innumerable ways in which God has proved Himself and met our every need in the past.³⁹

Be on your way then, anxiety and worry – because we are assured that the Lord knows, the Lord hears and the Lord cares.

Although, as our Lord assures us, God knows the things we need before we ask Him, here we are told plainly to state our needs and desires to Him as if He needed the information. But then it is for God, and not for us, to reconcile such an exhortation with His own omniscience – if they need to be reconciled at all. It's certainly not something for us to get anxious and worried about! Clearly, just as an earthly father knows the needs of his children, and yet teaches them to ask him to meet those very needs – that they might develop a sense of dependence, confidence and trust – so God deals with us His children.

I think of the classic case of King Hezekiah in 2 Kings 19, where he actually invited the Lord to 'open His eyes and see', and to read the threatening letter from Sennacherib, the King of Assyria.

This past Tuesday I spoke at Adamsdown about the experiences of Saul of Tarsus in the years immediately following his conversion. Among many others, I covered that incident when, as Saul himself later told the story, 'the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me. And through a window in a basket I was let down by the wall, and escaped his hands'.⁴⁰ The word translated 'guard' in 2 Corinthians 11 is the very same word as that translated 'guard' here. It is a military term, used of a garrison of soldiers whose business it was both to protect a city from an enemy and to block up every way of escape.

And, in the very making known of our requests to God, the automatic consequence, Paul says, is the enjoyment of God's own peace – His peace which mounts guard (as the sentries of a garrison) on our hearts and minds, to repel and fend off all attacks from crippling anxieties and distressing fears – when we enjoy the luxury of the unruffled and untroubled calm – the stillness – the tranquillity – which surrounds the throne of the Majesty (of the Greatness) in the heavens.

I understand that in Paul's time the city of Philippi housed a Roman garrison. The saints there would readily have appreciated the picture which Paul was painting of the seat of their thoughts and feelings as a place defended to such an extent that no anxious cares could ever sneak in – as on separate occasions the two Israelite spies, young David and Saul of Tarsus sneaked out!

And how my worries and my problems suddenly shrink when dragged before the throne of God and of grace. And that throne is truly a wonderful place. As is often said, it is where the burdens are lifted from our shoulders onto His – where our heartfelt requests encounter heaven's resources – where we trade our anxiety for God's serenity.

Oh, when will I learn that I can make known my requests to God 'in everything' – no matter how great or how small – that there is nothing too great for God's power to accomplish, nor too small for His fatherly heart to care about – that, frankly, if a problem isn't worth praying about, it isn't worth worrying about.

Such undisturbed peace 'surpasses' (transcends)⁴¹ our highest thoughts ... or, as the word can be translated,⁴² it is 'better than' understanding ... 'better' by far even than understanding the reason for our trials or knowing what is going to happen in the future.

Which brings us to verse 8. I have seen 'an optimist' defined as a woman who slips her shoes back on when the preacher says, 'Finally'. I suspect that Paul's expression (literally, 'for the rest') indicates that he is now moving on to a fresh point ... and one with which I must deal very briefly.

As we all know, our minds suffer attack from more than one direction. They are bombarded, not only by anxious thoughts, but by sinful and worldly thoughts. And so the apostle provides us in verse 8 with what we might well label, 'Food for thought' ... an extensive menu of wholesome and nourishing 'Food for thought' for the Christian mind. No junk food here!

The promise, as you notice, concerns, not 'the peace of God', but 'the God of peace' – a title which occurs seven times in the New Testament⁴³ – turning our attention from the gift to the Giver.

But, as was the case with the enjoyment of the peace of God in verses 6 and 7, so here in verses 8 and 9 the enjoyment of the presence of God is conditional. In verses 6 and 7, the apostle exhorted his readers 'in everything' to make known their requests to God, and promised that then, but only then, '*and the peace of God ... shall guard your hearts and minds*'. Now in verses 8 and 9, he exhorts his readers to ponder 'these things' and to practise 'these things', and promises that then, but only then, '*and the God of peace shall be with you*'.

And so, if our enjoyment of 'the peace of God' is dependent upon prayerfully leaving our anxieties with Him, our enjoyment of the presence of 'the God of peace' is dependent upon (a) thinking right thoughts, and (b) doing right things – in accordance with both Paul's teaching and example.

Footnotes

- ¹ Paul himself enjoyed four citizenships in all; compare Acts 21. 39; Eph. 2. 12; Acts 22. 28.
- ² This expression is found nine times in Philippians – and 43 times in all of Paul’s letters.
- ³ Phil. 1. 27.
- ⁴ Phil. 2. 2.
- ⁵ Phil. 3. 1.
- ⁶ Phil. 1. 7-8.
- ⁷ Compare 1 Thess. 2. 19.
- ⁸ Phil. 3. 13-14.
- ⁹ Phil. 1. 27-29.
- ¹⁰ Phil. 1. 23-24.
- ¹¹ Phil. 2. 17.
- ¹² Phil. 1. 1.
- ¹³ Phil. 1. 4, 7, 8, 25; 2. 17, 26.
- ¹⁴ Phil. 2. 2.
- ¹⁵ Phil. 1. 27; 2. 2.
- ¹⁶ Phil. 2. 2.
- ¹⁷ Compare Heb. 6. 10.
- ¹⁸ Luke 5. 1-11, with Matt. 4. 18; Mark 1. 16.
- ¹⁹ Philemon 10-11.
- ²⁰ Phil. 4. 3.
- ²¹ Luke 10. 20. Paul quotes our Lord’s words recorded in Luke 10. 7 in 1 Tim. 5. 18.
- ²² Phil. 3. 20.
- ²³ 1 Thess. 5. 16 (the shortest verse in the Greek New Testament – not John 11. 35).
- ²⁴ Acts 16. 24-25.
- ²⁵ Phil. 4. 9.
- ²⁶ 2 Cor. 6. 10.
- ²⁷ Hab. 3. 17-18.
- ²⁸ 2 Cor. 10. 1.
- ²⁹ Phil. 2. 5-8.
- ³⁰ v. 1 is yield nothing of gospel, as 1. 27; v. 5 is yield everything of self. Yet need wisdom ... times necessary take stand for sake of others, as Acts 16 to magistrates. Inconceivable write verse 9 if not perfectly consistent ... for sake of young church about leave behind. Of course, there is a time to stand for what is right. The forbearing person is not spineless but selfless.
- ³¹ Phil. 3. 20.
- ³² 1 Cor. 16. 22.
- ³³ Compare Psa. 34. 18; 145. 18. Compare, Clement of Rome to the Corinthians, ‘Let us reflect how *near He is*, and that none of the thoughts or reasonings in which we engage are hid from Him’, chapter 21.
- ³⁴ Phil. 1. 28-30.
- ³⁵ 2 Cor. 11. 28; Phil. 2. 20.
- ³⁶ Matt. 6. 31-32.
- ³⁷ 1 Pet. 5. 7.
- ³⁸ 1 Pet. 2. 24.
- ³⁹ Perhaps in the light of our Lord’s words in verse 32, ‘Your heavenly Father knows that you have need of all these things’, Paul’s exhortation ‘make known your requests to God’ reads rather strange. The more so given that the Lord had said a little earlier, in the context of prayer, ‘your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him’, v. 8. But in the end it is for God, and not for us, to reconcile such matters – if they need to be reconciled at all. It’s certainly not something for us to get anxious and worried about! Clearly, just as an earthly father knows the needs of his children, and yet teaches them to ask him to meet those needs – that they might develop a sense of dependence confidence and trust – so God deals with us His children.
- ⁴⁰ 2 Cor. 11. 32-33.
- ⁴¹ See Eph. 3. 20.
- ⁴² See Phil. 2. 3.
- ⁴³ Rom. 15. 33; 16. 20; 1 Cor. 14. 33; 2 Cor. 13. 11; Phil. 4. 9; 1 Thess. 5. 23; Heb. 13. 20.