

Sunday 11 October 2020
A Sermon by the Rev James W. Aitchison
Based on a Reading from the Lectionary

Opening Prayer:

Holy God, you are light, and in you there is no darkness at all.

Shift my focus today

from whatever is false to that which is true;

from whatever is vulgar to that which is honourable;

from whatever is corrupt to that which is just;

from whatever is inauthentic to that which is pure;

from whatever is detestable to that which is pleasing;

from whatever is insignificant to that which is commendable;

that I may live in the light.

Through Christ Jesus I pray. Amen.

(FOW Worship)

A Reading from Holy Scripture:

Philippians Chapter 4:1-9

Closing appeal for steadfastness and unity

4 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!

² I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³ Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the Gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Final exhortations

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

(NIVUK)

Sermon:

The Apostle Paul is languishing in a prison cell in Rome, awaiting trial: The date is probably between 61 and 63 AD.

From his cell, Paul writes a heartfelt and encouraging letter to the Christians in Philippi, a major city in Macedonia, an Eastern Kingdom of ancient Greece.

Paul's first visit to Philippi was around 49-50 AD: there was already a small and fledgling community of Christians there and he visits to give them encouragement and to build them up in the Faith.

Paul would have had some interesting memories of Philippi, because on his first visit he and his companions, Luke and Silas, were daily harassed by a slave girl possessed with the 'spirit of divination:' it was said she could foretell the future.

Paul, fed up with the daily harassment from this slave girl, eventually cast out the demon that possessed her, and she was no longer able to go about making 'predictions.' You might have thought that everyone was delighted, not so: her master was not well pleased, because her ability to predict things was a great source of income for him. (Exploitation of the vulnerable was as real then as it is today, and it has always been a filthy stain on humanity).

The owners of the slave girl, have Paul and Silas, (Somehow Luke manages to evade arrest), brought before the court, and accuse them of being 'Jewish troublemakers;' a phrase that was to echo down the centuries, an echo which rather than become softer was to get ever louder, and was at its loudest in Nazi Germany in the 1930s. If we think for one moment that that echo of anti Semitism has faded away, then we only have to look at what is going on now in our own country and in at least one of our political parties.

The owner of the slave girl might well have called them 'Jewish troublemakers,' to strengthen his case with the authorities, because in 19 AD the Emperor Tiberius had expelled the Jews from Rome and later in 41 AD they were expelled again, this time by the Emperor Claudius. Why? Because they were said to be, 'troublemakers.'

Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into prison, but this seemed to inspire them, whilst there they prayed and sang hymns, so far from being despondent or afraid, they were confident, hopeful and even cheerful. Even while they were being persecuted they praised God and rejoiced in Him.

At midnight an earthquake shook the prison and the gates sprang open; the gaoler thinking that the prisoners had escaped was about to commit suicide (which was considered as a way of regaining honour for failing in a duty, or possibly to avoid a worse punishment). Paul and Silas stop the gaoler from killing himself and assure him that no one has taken the opportunity to escape; he is astonished, and in recognizing that there is something very different about these two prisoners, he asks them what he must do to be saved. He probably knew why Paul and Silas were in prison and had heard that they preached about the forgiveness of sin through Jesus Christ, so his question was not about physical safety. They tell him, "believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household."

(See Acts 16:25-31)

(There is a whole Sermon in that last sentence, but let us return to the story).

When the magistrates discover that Paul and Silas are Roman citizens, they apologise for their treatment of them and release them. (Roman Citizens were afforded the protection of the Roman Empire). As soon as they are freed they continue with their missionary journey and head west for Thessalonica.

Now fast forward some twelve years to today's reading from Philippians, and we see Paul in a prison cell in Rome writing a letter to the Christians in Philippi. In his letter he urges unity, peace and faithfulness in the things of the Lord.

Euodia and Syntyche were women who had worked alongside Paul in taking the Gospel to others and as such they were influential figures in the Church in Philippi. In Paul's letter it is clear that there had been a disagreement between these two women and as often happens

it seems that people took sides thus causing a rift in the fellowship (If we go back a few chapters to Philippians 2:14 we can read about the murmuring and arguing probably caused by disagreement within the leadership.

Paul is well aware of the danger of discord in the Church and so encourages Euodia and Syntyche to look to the Lord and to find a common mind in Him, in other words seek the Lord's 'mind' and stop quarrelling. To this end, Paul urges his loyal companion (Someone unnamed, yet trusted) to help Euodia and Syntyche to be reconciled.

In her book *Women and Monarchy in Macedonia*, Elizabeth Donnelly Carney, points out that 'Macedonian women were less constrained than women in Greek society,' so it is possible that Euodia and Syntyche hosted two of the house congregations in Philippi.

It would have been very damaging to the Church if two 'house groups' (to use a modern phrase), were at odds and started feuding. One of the most damaging and painful things experienced by Christians is division in the Church. There are always reasons why Christians fall out: doctrinal, financial, emotional, parochial, and legal. Now of course Christians are allowed to disagree with each other, but what we are not allowed, is to be disagreeable with each other. We are to exhibit the gentleness that Paul speaks of in verse 5 of chapter 4, 'Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.'

The word 'gentleness' in this verse can be translated as 'moderation,' that is, not moderating or compromising the truth, but rather in the sense of not standing on all of one's supposed rights, but waiving a part thereof.

This is about grace; God is gracious to us, for He does not press the full severity of His Divine law against us as we deserve. (Psalm 130:3, 'If you Lord kept a record of sins, Lord who could stand.')

We ought then to be gracious to others.

The reminder that the Lord is near ought to be an encouragement and an inducement to all of God's children to be gentle with others.

Paul goes on to tell the Christians at Philippi, that they are not to worry about anything, and yes, he uses the word anything. There is nothing that ought to worry the Christian. Now that goes against all that we are used to, for let's face it we are used to worrying, we are familiar with it and some would not know what to do if they stopped worrying.

Paul tells the believer, instead of worrying, pray!

Rather than worrying about everything we are to pray about everything, and as we present our prayers to God for our needs and even our desires, we must always be sure thank Him.

When we are enabled to pray like this, we are promised that something amazing will happen, something that we, who are so used to worrying, can hardly imagine. We will find peace.

Paul puts it like this,

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

Oh, we are worriers are we not? We worry about our family, we worry about neighbours, we worry about not having enough money, or perhaps having too much, we worry about, the weather, our jobs, our homes, our health our retirement, and etc., etc., etc.

The word worry is from an old English word, 'wyrgan,' which means to strangle, it conveyed the idea of 'to seize by the throat and tear.' Well that is an description of what worry does; it strangles the joy out of life, it seizes us by the throat and tears from our life all the good things, such as faith, joy, hope, love and peace. We end up worrying about living and worrying about dying and it seems we cannot escape from it.

Of course it is not wrong to concern ourselves with life's events and to spend time reflecting upon them and dealing with them. We are duty bound to take care of our family, our jobs, our retirement our income and etc. But when these things begin to grab us by the throat and to choke us, they have gone beyond being normal responsibilities and have become perpetual tyrants.

As you read this sermon, it is liklely that you are worried about something or other, we all are, but the Apostle Paul, who knew a great deal about deprivation, suffering, and persecution, has this to say to us,

'Do not be worry about anything!'

When Paul was in prison in Philippi, he did not allow despondency or worry to strangle his hope and joy and he sang praises to God. Now in prison again, this time in Rome, he could so easily let worry get him down, but he writes in the first chapter of his letter to the Philippians

'Now I want you to know that what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel...I am in chains for Christ...Yes I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ will turn out for my deliverance.'

If ever a person had cause to be worried, to be anxious, surely it was Paul. He was a Jew, and in Rome there was widespread distrust of the Jews, he was a follower of Jesus, a Christian, and Christians were beginning to be persecuted by both the Jewish authorities and the Roman Empire. Very soon, 64AD in fact, widespread persecution of Christians began, when the Emperor Nero blamed them for setting fire to large sections of Rome. (It is likely that he himself had ordered the fires).

Paul expects that he will not be viewed favourably, yet whilst in chains, languishing in a prison cell, and possibly expecting to be executed, he prays and through prayer he experiences God's peace, a peace that passes human understanding.

Why does such peace surpass our ability to understand it? Well, probably because we usually associate peace with an absence of conflict, trouble and those circumstances that are conducive to feelings of well-being.

'The sun is shining; I'm sitting with my feet up, with a cup of tea, listening to my favourite music. I have all I need, my health is good and all my relationships are fine; all is well!'

Ha! Even when we are enjoying such 'feelings of peace,' brought about by comfortable circumstances, we worry, we worry that this state will come to an end and we worry about what tomorrow will bring.

God's Peace however, is not dependent upon our circumstances and strangely not even upon our feelings.

God's Peace is not about sitting in the midst of troubles with a witless smile on our face because we are either unaware of our circumstances or their consequences. (That is like burying our head in the sand, or as it is said of Nero, playing the fiddle as Rome burned).

The Peace of God comes to us even when we are fully aware of our circumstances, no matter how ugly or terrifying they may be.

The Peace of God is not dependent upon our mood on any particular day, what this Peace depends on is the Unchanging One.

God's Peace is not dependent upon our reason; we cannot find it by trying to convince ourselves that we need not be worried or anxious. Good reasoning may bring some relief, but this kind of peace is dependent upon the strength of our faculties, and we all know that our faculties are frail.

God's Peace, the Peace of God comes to us, not because there is an absence of trouble in our life, nor because we are in the mood; it does not come to us come because we have convinced ourselves by reasoning that we need not worry, and it does not come because of the strength of our character.

God's Peace comes to us, through PRAYER.

Prayer consists in having honest engagement with God (we can even use words). In prayer we convey to God all that is in our mind and on our heart: our concerns, worries and fears, as well as our joys. Prayer is about seeking God, His will and His help, but we must not stop at these we must always thank Him. We must thank Him for being God, for His love and mercy, for His Omnipotence (Almighty power), His Omniscience (All knowing), His Omnipresence (Being present everywhere at all times). Are we not thankful that God has chosen to bring us into a relationship with Him?

Nothing can thwart God's will, nothing can stand against Him, nothing can take us out of the loving care He has for us, we cannot even remove ourselves from His love.

No matter the circumstances of your life, no matter the pain or trauma, if you pray, if you speak honestly and earnestly with God, opening your heart to Him, you will find that you are opening the flood gates to your soul and letting the Peace of God flow in.

So my friends PRAY! PRAY! And PRAY Again! And then keep praying, and then the Peace of God, and the Peace from God, which passes all human understanding, will be yours.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Prayers of Intercession:

[A period of silence may follow each petition.]

Dear God, you never abandon your children;
your steadfast love endures forever,
your faithfulness throughout the generations.

We pray for those in our world whose trust has been broken
through exploitation by people in power
or abuse by those in intimate circles.

We pray for those whose trust has been broken
through abandonment by those who promised to stay
or manipulation by those who refuse to let go.

We pray for those whose trust has been broken
through cold comfort in times of affliction
or the callous rebukes of those on the margins.

We pray for those whose trust has been broken
through the trauma of war
or the chaos of assault.

We pray for those who are ill and those who are dying,
May they be aware of the healing peace giving presence
Of the Holy Spirit.

Empower us, your body,
to enfold and protect those broken in body, mind, or spirit,
through your all-embracing grace. **Amen.**

(FOW worship)

Commemoration of the Faithful Departed

And now, Father, bring to our remembrance the unity of the Church in heaven and on earth, fill us with the joy of the faithful departed, and keep us faithful to you all the days of our service here on earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Who taught us to pray, when He said, 'Our Father...'

The Lord's Prayer

OUR Father which art in heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:
For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,
For ever. Amen.

The Blessing

The Blessing of God Almighty, The Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit be upon you. Amen!