

SERMON TRINITY 19 15<sup>TH</sup> October 2023

Phil 4:1-9

Matt 22:1-14

What a sorrowful week it has been in the world. It has been really difficult to think about what God wanted me to say ....The appalling events in Israel and Gaza, leave us speechless, feeling helpless in the face of the senseless, terrible suffering, and the loss of so many innocent lives. Our hearts break for all those whose worlds have been ripped apart, and are grieving, displaced, and so afraid. In Afghanistan, almost unnoticed in the light of events in the Middle East, yet another natural disaster has befallen a country ravaged by war and claimed in excess of 2,500 lives. The terrible earthquakes in Morocco and Turkey have slipped off the news agenda almost entirely, yet their suffering grinds on. It is so desperately hard to turn and face the suffering in the world, isn't it. I have had to listen hard, not turn away.

But face it we must, grapple with it we must, as Christians, and as fellow human beings.

How then are we to respond? How are we to draw sustenance and hope from Scripture, from the readings we have heard today, to at least help us to find a chink of light, is it possible?

Well, yes, it is, and I think it is worth looking at these readings to see if the messages of millennia ago can speak to us, guide us, here in Burwell, and Reach, now.

Let's talk first about those wonderful verses from Philippians. On the face of it they seem to have little to do with the tragedy of the world today. They speak of rejoicing, of joy, of love and gentleness. BUT.... let's consider Paul's situation when he wrote this Letter. When we considered the reading from Phil 1 a couple of weeks ago, Paul was enduring a lengthy imprisonment. The persecution of the followers of that early church was intensifying, and Paul's fate was uncertain. So he was writing to strengthen resolve, to unite people, to encourage them to face persecution and shine as lights in that dark world. He wrote of the joy that a union with Christ could bring, and that this could lead to confident hope and jubilation *despite* suffering.

Just as in Philippians 1 Paul urged us to be steadfast in faith, so here in Philippians 4 he sets out, if you like, a sort of prayer or set of instructions. It is as if his entire Letter is a command to live Christ's story as our own story – here in v 8 we are urged to think about whatever is true, honourable, just, pleasing, commendable, and, importantly, worthy of praise.....

But here is the challenge, which I have been pondering on this week.

How to do this, to be capable of rejoicing, as Paul asks us repeatedly, in a world which seems so often to offer so little to rejoice in? This is addressed directly by the writer Paula Gooder – she is a Canon at St Paul's Cathedral, a New Testament scholar and a really wonderful writer. She has written books about the imagined lives of important figures in the bible, most notably, the women in the bible and in her latest book she tells the story of Lydia. Lydia is a central figure in Philippians – indeed, a central figure in Paul's story, and the story of the early church.

In her book, Dr Gooder addresses head on this idea, in Phil 4, of rejoicing in the face of suffering. It is set in the context of Paul's followers, the early Christians persecuted and afraid, aware of the threats to Paul's life and grieving his absence from them.

Paul's Letter finally reaches them, in Philippi, and as was the custom, they read it together, in community, in Lydia's house. One of the characters bursts out, having read these exact verses and says 'how are you meant to rejoice when the world is falling apart around your ears'??

Does that sound familiar?? We can, surely, all identify with that not only on the world stage but in our own lives.

So Lydia answers, and let me read you that short passage.

(EXTRACT p 205).

This is not a vague, woolly, let's all be cheerful kind of approach – the kind of blind optimism of which Christians can often be accused. No, this is a deliberate, focused way of thinking and being. A kind of spiritual discipline, if you like. To rejoice. Indeed, in some translations of the original Greek text, this word 'rejoice' means to 'delight in'. Delight in – isn't that a more measured, achievable idea? That if we praise God, give thanks for his grace and his love, delight in his love for **us**, we might

begin to find peace whatever the situations in which we find ourselves?  
He says

‘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 minds in Christ Jesus’....

The Peace of God. We talk about peace a lot, don't we. We exchange the peace, we seek peace in the love of Christ, we reach towards it, and as we see in Phil, Paul brings us gently to a place where, if we rejoice in, delight in, the Lord, we can begin to feel that peace, even if the world around us feels unstable, in turmoil. The world is more in need of peace, in every sense, than we can ever have imagined. We need to turn our faces, not **away** from suffering and sorrow, but **towards** God, through his son Jesus Christ, to feel that confidence in his love and grace which is our joy. To accept His invitation to the banquet we heard about in the Gospel. It takes effort, perhaps yes, and resolve, and courage. But the rewards are infinite, and in this fragile, troubled world, we need to strive ever harder to open our hearts and minds to the promise of peace. We must hold fast to God, and do so in the hope that some of that striving for peace, and praying for peace, will in the end, mean that peace will prevail in even the darkest corners, where the light of Christ most needs to shine.