

Philippians 4.4-9

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Lord Jesus, Word of God, speak to us now;
that listening to your voice,
we might know your will
and live to your glory.
Amen

We all know what a robber or burglar looks like: dressed in a black and white striped jumper, with a mask over his eyes he carries a swag bag, possibly with a dollar sign printed on it, over his shoulder! He's probably creeping along on tiptop so as not to be heard! If only it were true wouldn't we find it so much easier to spot a villain and take precautions!

In our epistle reading this morning, we read Paul's description of what a Christian might look like in practice. Over the next few minutes I wanted to look at them in turn.

Maybe you might ask God which if any, are areas in which he might be calling you to become more Christlike – for each of the characteristics of a Christian are most supremely seen in Jesus himself.

Maybe we can each go home this morning affirmed in the progress we are making in living out our faith, but also with a sense of how God is calling us to grow further.

So, this morning we are in Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Paul visited Philippi, a Roman colony in Macedonia, as a result of a vision from God. We read about this in Acts 16.

He meets a wealthy woman by the river, Lydia, and after sharing the gospel with her she becomes a Christian.

Whilst in Philippi, Paul is imprisoned; but God rescues Paul with an earthquake. God's action, and Paul's words convince the jailor to become a Christian; and he and his whole household are baptized.

Voila – a church is born.

Paul's letter to the Philippians written some years later to what is obviously a growing church, is written by Paul from prison – possibly in Ephesus, possibly Caesarea or possibly Rome.

The Philippians have sent a gift to Paul and Paul is writing back to say 'thank you'. He introduces some people he is sending to them and offers them some encouragement. It's a warm letter written by a pastor to one of his churches.

In this context we find Paul's exhortations near the end of his letter; chapter 4.4-9. His exhortations are obviously chosen to be helpful to the Philippians in their context. Had they been a small church suffering persecution from outside and heresy from within, he might have said something different. But as it is, he wants to affirm them and help them continue to live out their faith and grow.

Verse 4:

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

How often have we said to our kids; or maybe it was said to us as children, "stop moping around. You must be able to find something to do!"

So often we in effect think of ourselves as helpless victims to circumstances.

We aren't!

We have choices we can make.

Are we going to focus on the negative things in our lives or are we going to focus on the positive?

God has given us so much. We can choose on his goodnesses to us.

Or we can focus on the things we find frustrating or difficult.

Paul wants to encourage the Philippians to not get into that downwards spiral of negativity, but instead to look up to God and actively choose to rejoice in all that God has done for us.

Verse 5:

"Let your gentleness be known to everyone."

"Your" in this case is second person plural, not singular. Collectively the Philippian church should be known as a community which treats others gently.

Didn't Jesus say that he wouldn't snuff out a smoldering wick or break a bruised reed?

His followers should be like him - not harsh, judgemental and demanding; but forgiving, forbearing and kind.

Verse 6:

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

Again, wasn't it Jesus who said not to worry about what you will eat or drink or wear? God knows what you need.

Wasn't it Jesus who taught his followers to pray in faith, "give us this day our daily bread"?

The words of the old hymn, What a friend we have in Jesus surely has it right:
O what we peace we often forfeit,
O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.
When we are anxious we have a choice: to expend our energy worrying about our problems or bringing them to God to ask him to deal with them.
In verse 7 Paul promises God's peace when we bring our troubles to God.

Verse 8:

"Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think on these things."

The Weightwatchers saying, "A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips" is so true for our eyes and our minds as well.

Something we see for just a few moments can stay in our minds for ever – an image on a screen or words from a book.

We need to be careful that we don't pollute our minds through looking at and thinking on unhelpful things.

Positively, stories of heroic deeds or acts of kindness can encourage and inspire.

The two Cheaper by the Dozen films are a great pick-me-up when I feel I'm not doing too well as a father. As I watch Steve Martin bumble along as a dad, but with a heart of gold, I'm encouraged that I might not be perfect but with a bit of love and patience; and the support of a long-suffering wife, I can do ok... and family life is something worth investing time and energy in.

The Philippian Christians were definitely a tiny minority in their Roman, pagan city.

Its interesting that Paul does not tell them to withdraw from their community.

Instead he says, "whatever is true, whatever is honourable...if anything is worthy of praise".

There was good and bad in the culture in Philippi; as there is in our culture today.

Of course we will want to focus our attention on the Scriptures as the inspired word of God, and on Christian stories, but whenever we find something good; something which reflects what God has commended, then lets rejoice in that and be inspired by it...

And maybe even find points of connection with those who aren't yet Christians in order to point them to the One from whom all good gifts come.

Finally on this point, a word of warning:

Whilst we might want to engage with whatever is good around us, we might also want to be careful about those with whom we spend our time.

Spending time with those who are constantly speaking negatively; gossiping, criticizing and tearing others down will have a negative effect on us.

We are called to be part of the world; that we might share Jesus with all.

But if we are aware that some people are affecting us negatively we might need to be wise about how much we share in their company and where we need to draw boundaries so as not to lose the joy that God gives us.

And then verse 9:

“Keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you all.”

How brave of Paul to tell the Philippians to imitate him.

In 1 Corinthians 11.1, Paul again writes for imitate him, as he imitates Christ.

The Christian life needs to be “fleshed” out.

We celebrate the various saints of the church, ancient and more contemporary, not because they were perfect, but because in some way they show us how to live out our faith in the nitty gritty of everyday life.

Find someone who is obviously making progress at living from Jesus at learn from them – watch what they do, talk to them.

And in turn, who could you model the Christian life to?

Last week I attended a Diocesan course/retreat for mid-ministry clergy. One of things we talked about was the need for clergy not to overwork. Clergy need to set an example of living a holistic life – which keeps work commitments, family commitments and time for rest in a healthy balance.

We can't preach what we don't model.

And what is true for the clergy is true for us all, in our own calling and circumstances.

So, what might God be saying to you today?

To make an active choice to rejoice?

To display gentleness?

To bring your worries to God instead of worrying about them on your own?

To be conscious in filling your mind with good things, not bad?

To learn from someone else; or set someone else an example.

Pause for a moment.

What is God laying on your heart?

I'm going to invite you to stand.

I'm going to pray for God to speak to us by his Holy Spirit,

And then maybe as God speaks to you, if he does, you might like quietly to talk to God.

Maybe confessing sin, asking for help, making commitment for the future.

Let's stand to pray...