

Philippians 1:21-30

2nd in preaching series

Paul, servant of Christ Jesus to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Downe/Cudham: grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

What better way for me to begin my very first sermon with you, than to use the greeting Paul starts this letter to his friends at Philippi with. Paul is full of thanksgiving, in his opening paragraph for his church, and I too would like to express my heartfelt thanks for welcoming me, a bit out of the blue I know, into your community here in Downe/Cudham.

My husband, Chris, and our two boys, Theo and Noah, are excited to be here, and are looking forward to getting to know you all, and seeing how we can, together, do what Paul is commending his friends to do, in the church in Philippi: spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

So, we pick up today's section of the letter just after Paul has declared it doesn't matter if he lives or dies, Christ will still be exalted.

Let's explore that further as our reading begins with, "as long as I'm alive in this body, there is good work for me to do. If I had to choose right now, I hardly know which I'd choose. Hard choice! The desire to break camp here and be with Christ is powerful. Some days I can think of nothing better. But most days, because of what you are going through, I am sure that it's better for me to stick it out here. So, I plan to be around awhile, companion to you as your growth and joy in this life, of trusting God, continues. You can start looking forward to a great reunion when I come to visit you again. We'll be praising Christ, enjoying each other."

That translation was taken from the Message version of the Bible, in case you were following it in your Bibles, and the words didn't quite match up!

What was Paul wanting to convey to his dear friends in Philippi?

There was the very real dilemma that Paul could face execution. He was after all in prison, well, under house arrest, and with a guard constantly chained to his wrist, whilst writing this letter. So, there was a very real possibility that when he eventually faced trial it could go one of two ways, release or execution.

We see here in this paragraph of the letter, Paul mulling over, as he writes, which outcome he would rather encounter. He opens by saying being alive is being in Christ. For him Christ has been the beginning of life, for as we recall on that day in Damascus, it was as if his life begun all over again, when he encountered the risen Jesus. Living for him, is quite literally being alive and in union with Jesus.

And yet, for Paul, death is also gain – for him it was a way into being even nearer to Christ, a way of being in a fuller, deeper, closer relationship with his Lord. So, what is not to like in that?

Paul is genuinely caught in his pros and cons list, for being alive in Christ or being dead in Christ, both are equally matched. He really doesn't know which one he prefers. The Greek word Paul uses to express being caught between the two desires is *senechomai* (see nee cho my) a word that is used to describe a traveller in a narrow passageway, with a wall or rock on either side, unable to turn around and only able to carry straight on.

Paul's desire was to depart and be with Christ in eternity. If you would like a bit more Greek, the word for depart here is *analuein* (anna loo in) a word which means, quite literally, to strike camp; loosening the tent ropes, pulling up the tent pegs and moving your camp on. For Paul death is a moving on, a moving on into a deeper and fuller life with Christ.

But as we hear, Paul decided that to remain alive, was for the greater good of his friends in Philippi. It wasn't for his own gain but for theirs, as he could then continue to help and support them. They would be able to look at him and see in him a shining example of how, through Christ, one can face the ultimate trials of life and still exude God's love.

Which brings me to wondering what God wants to say to us this morning, here in Downe/Cudham, through this paragraph of Paul's letter?

I wonder if it might be something about the choice we have during these continuing strange times of whether we bunker down and concentrate on our own relationship with God or we strive to find ways to be his light and peace out in the world?

Of course, we know life isn't as cut and dry, black and white, as that, its far more nuanced, for without growing our personal relationship with Christ how can we then shine as a light to others?

Paul's dilemma of whether to live or die has resonances of this same dilemma for churches. I wonder what you think?

The second half of our reading today sees Paul going into quite a bit of detail about how he expects his friends to live.

The word he uses for conducting yourselves is one he rarely uses in his writings, *politeuesthai* (poli twos thai) which means to be a citizen. Remember Paul is writing this letter from the very centre of the Roman Empire, Rome, and he is also a Roman citizen, which is how he got to be in Rome under house arrest in the first place. Philippi was a Roman colony and such colonies were mini replicas of Rome itself; citizens spoke Latin, wore Latin dress, called their magistrates by Latin names. Paul is basically reminding his friends that they are not only Roman citizens, and therefore know the privileges and responsibilities of being such, they have an even higher duty than that. Wherever they are, they must also remember to live in a way that befits a citizen of the Kingdom of God.

Paul expects them to stand firm – he doesn't want them when the going gets tough, to bottle it and deny their citizenship in Christ. He wants them to weather the storms in a way that glorifies God and not only that, he expects them to do it together, as a united body of believers. Let the world quarrel, Christians must be one. If they can be like that, they will set such an example, that others around them will come to realise that there is something missing in their lives and seek to join in.

Paul doesn't suggest this is going to be easy, far from it, his friends know how difficult it was for Paul when he first came to Philippi, and the battles he encountered, quite literally. For a reminder of this do please read Acts 16.9. But this is the calling upon their lives and one that Paul is encountering with them.

And for us, what might God be saying to us as the congregation of Downe/Cudham about how we should live?

The phrase that stuck out for me was: striving together as one.

Now I don't know anything about you, your stories, your shared history and so I have no idea how you inhabit differences. I wonder if there is an invitation from God here, in these uncertain times again, when its difficult to fully understand what we can and cant do, of finding a mutual way forward together? Of hearing our different views and then finding a united voice so that the people of Downe/Cudham can see us striving together as one, for the faith of the Gospel.

The section of the letter that we've been looking at this morning ends just before the pivotal and central passage of this whole letter; the poem in chapter 2, verses 6-11. Everything before and after this part of the letter picks up various themes of the poem and develops them to show that we are to live our lives as an expression of Jesus' life. Why? Quite simply so others can come to know him too.

Each week we end our communion service together by saying the words of the dismissal: Go in peace to love and serve the Lord, to which we all reply: in the name of Christ, amen. I wonder today, in the light of what we have explored together, whether we can say these words afresh; that we will actively seek ways, in unity with each other, to serve the Lord this week, in visible ways here in Downe/Cudham?

AMEN