

It's great we can be here this morning to celebrate with Rach as she celebrates with us. I haven't had a lot of time to ask her if she feels any different this morning? I know yesterday was a great occasion, and the godly weight of handling holy things in breaking bread and drinking wine are priestly tasks not to be taken lightly, as neither are offering God's blessing and God's forgiveness to all who come wanting to receive blessing and forgiveness.

When Rach very soon stands behind the communion table she stands there in the place of Jesus – the meal he shared with his friends the night before he died we do more than simply remember – we become part of it here and now – we do more than remember, we become part of that meal – just as for Jewish people throughout the centuries before and after Christ the Passover ceder is more than re-enactment – they are there on that night when God brought his people out of slavery into the promised land. So too, Rach helps us be there in that upper room, not just to imagine being there – and Christ's words are words for us – take and eat – this is my body broken for you, for you now today here in Cudham church.

Those of us who have come to a living faith in Jesus Christ are called Christians – the word means 'little Christs' – so just as Rach becomes Christ for us at the table, so we are called to be Christ each and every day.

This was Paul's plea in our first reading. Here in church we've been working our way through Paul's letter to the church in Philippi – if you're here for the first time today, sorry you've missed the beginning of the story – but a brief recap. Paul's prayer for the Christians he knew and loved so well is that they would be united in faith – there were clearly some divisive issues in the church which were causing the Christians there to lose their focus in sharing the good news of Jesus, and taking away their joy in being citizens of the kingdom of God. We ended last week with Paul's appeal (1:27) because of who we already are – citizens of heaven, to live in a manner worthy of that citizenship.

So to today's reading – Philippians 2:1-13 which you'll find on your order of service, with a blank bit to take notes, or to doodle, or even to stare at if you find that useful!

The passage falls into 3 bits

- 1) 2:1-4(5). Unison and harmony
- 2) 2:6-11. Christ's mind
- 3) 2:12-18. Responses, human and divine

- 1) Unison and harmony – Paul focuses in on unity time and again. He mentions it as we’ve already seen in 1:27- it’s necessary equipment in a hostile world. He feels the need to repeat it again – unity is the gospel’s hallmark – it’s what makes it genuine, not false. It’s 24 carat Christianity, not some gilded imitation of it. Here, Paul returns to a word that permeates Philippians – Joy! We looked in our first sermon in this series at how Paul could be thankful and joyful despite where he was, under house arrest in Rome – why? Not because of his circumstances, but because of the Gospel of Jesus Christ which he’d heard was still growing. Here in Ch 2:2 he says ‘make my joy complete’. How? By being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and mind. Wow, what a challenge – in any meeting of Christians we do have different views, whether it’s on matters of theology, or pews vs chairs, how we respond to covid19 with masks or not... the list is endless – it’s an impossible challenge? Have a look at v3-4 to see how Paul feels this comes about. I sing, and one thing I’m missing at the moment is singing with others as part of a choir. For a while I sang with the BBC symphony chorus. And what I learned there is that even for an amateur choir, discipline as well as having a trained voice was the only way to produce a good sound. Whether singing in unison or harmony requires dedication to the task – motivation, in other words– so too here – what’s our motivation to having the same mind – v3 doing nothing out of selfish ambition or vanity and instead seeing the other’s worth in Christ, and v4, a key verse – looking not to your own interests but to the interests of others. I was struck a week ago when Chris Whitty, the Chief medical adviser said in the press conference that marked where we are now in relation to covid19 that what was important is not just to think about ourselves, but about how our actions might affect others. If that’s true for Covid, how much more for us as Christians in our relationships within the church. Paul tells the church in Philippi to prioritize others, to put others first. This move to prioritize others is the key that unlocks Paul’s overall rhetoric here, particularly in his Christological argument. And then he gives us the perfect example of what that relationship between us as Christians might look like...
- 2) V6-11 the mind of Christ – what we think affects what we do, this was as true for Jesus as it is for us. The story of the cross of Christ is told in the four gospels – have a read through one if you’ve never done so before, maybe starting with Mark... that’s the story, the events, the truth, the eyewitness accounts of our crucified lord and saviour. The meaning of the cross lies at the heart of Paul’s letters. But these verses invite us to do something else... to see the cross through the eyes of the crucified one, and to enter the mind of Christ. I’m so glad no-one can look into my mind – to see my mixed motives, my imperfect choices, my selfish thoughts. Not so here. We stand here on very holy ground. These verses tell us what Jesus Christ had in mind and the journey he travelled. And what a journey. To properly unpack this would take longer than we’ve got today. So, in brief this Christian hymn, which is what it appears to be takes us back, back beyond the first Christmas (sorry to use the C word three months before the event!) Christ’s mind was to leave his eternal home at his father’s side with all its godlike nature and mind-blowing existence outside time and space, to decide to give all that up for you and for me and to live a life of service, ultimately seen in the mindful choice of setting us free eternally through his sacrificial death on the cross. He gives himself up willingly, so that we can be free eternally.

The jury is out about how we might be able to celebrate Christmas this year and looking back to earlier in the year Easter was different. Maybe none of us, though, really missed Ascension Day. The bible however makes a lot of Jesus's ascension, not least in this passage in verses 9-11. Here in this passage is Paul's second 'therefore' one looking back to our calling to unity, this one in v9. What's worth noting is that Christ Jesus who ascended, who God the Father exalted, is the same Christ who gave up everything, who lived on earth and went about among us, who died and was raised from death and v11 to who every tongue will acknowledge as Lord.

And so 3) v12-17 responses, human and divine. There's a third 'therefore' v12 and this is where Paul has been heading. Just as God the father assessed and then responded to the worth of his son's life of obedient service, so as we ponder the life of Jesus Christ, and do more than ponder, to copy, to be Christians, little Christs, we are called to respond. In verse 4 Paul stresses that right relationships between individuals in the life of the Christian fellowship, otherwise we preach an empty gospel – instead we are called (v12) to work things out. Do you remember maths at school? I really enjoyed maths, it's something I inherited from my father, and particularly liked working sums out, and showing my workings out. But did you notice it's not just working out (v12) but that God is working in (v13) us by his Spirit, to bring about his good purpose. Practically, what does all this mean? The work of the Christian carries the marks, seen in Jesus Christ, of obedience, responsibility and sensitivity. Obedience: God has given us the words of scripture for a reason- summed up by the psalmist (Ps 119:105) as a lamp to my feet and light to our path; they show us the way to live. Responsibility: it's your own salvation – take care of your own soul, your own relationship with the Lord and with others, and yes, that means along with others. Sensitivity: or in Paul's words 'with fear and trembling' – just as Rach will handle in bread and wine precious gifts, so too our salvation, won at such great a cost, is an awesome responsibility not to be squandered or wasted; and within the Christian fellowship not to harm or hurt the salvation God has given to others who are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

To conclude- V13 -God is at work in you. God is at work in me. God is at work in Rach. We respond to what he is doing in us; God is active, living in us through his Spirit when we open our lives to him; he will bring us to completeness; and as we receive Jesus in broken bread, I invite you today in particular to reflect on the cost of your salvation and my salvation, and to offer ourselves again to Jesus Christ to serve each other in unity so that the world may know Jesus Christ as Lord.

(prayer)