

Sunday 24th September 2023

Philippians 1:21-30, Matthew 20:1-16

Our first reading today was from Paul's letter to the church in Philippi this was probably written while Paul was in Rome under 'house arrest' - not quite in prison but with restrictions on what he could do. The church in Philippi had sent him a visitor with a financial gift and in his "thank you letter" Paul talks about what life in Christ can be. He explains how Christians should learn to live together, to be reconciled and to forgive one another, learning to accept things as they are and humbly finding our joy in Christ.

Paul's letter was sent to people who had accepted the Good News that Jesus is God's son and can save them from their sins. Paul reminds them that that isn't the end of the story and that in response to the love that God has shown they need to live differently – in a way Paul describes as being worthy of the Good News.

This description comes shortly after the famous verse that started our reading:

"For me to live is Christ, to die is gain".

This seems like a very dramatic sentence so let's break it down and think about the two halves of it.

For me to "live is Christ" doesn't mean that Paul is saying he, or any of us, are going to start healing lepers or walking on water. I think he means that he tries to live like Christ, responding in love to the love that has been shown to him and to us. We too should aim to be more caring, more forgiving, better at seeking reconciliation, at practicing self-sacrifice and trying to bring peace to those around us. If that sounds a bit like hard work let me give you an everyday example.

Almost every morning for the last 25 years I have got out of bed, made a cup of tea and taken it to Chris. I have to admit – just between us- that I don't do this because I particularly like being first out of bed in the morning, but because I know that he is absolutely not a morning person and waking up to a cup of tea makes the start of the day a bit better for him, and that in turn makes it a bit better for me, so I will continue to get up and make that cup of tea. And of course, treasure the odd days when he does the same for me.

If, for us to live is Christ, then our response of love is – like those cups of tea – not an obligation. I don't make the tea because I have to, I don't make it because that's what keeps our marriage together, I make it as a response to the love that Chris (and God) show me.

For each of us our response will be something different but whether for you it means helping a neighbour,
or doing a dull job to make enough money to feed your family,
or not losing your temper with an irritating colleague,
or sweeping the church floor,
doesn't matter as long as you are doing that in a manner worthy of the Good News. Sometimes it helps to remember that you are doing what you are doing in response to the love of God rather than responding directly to the person in front of you.

If we say "For me to live is Christ" then we need to try to live that and for me that means not just through standing up here occasionally or making cups of tea but through the way I relate to others, every day, responding to Jesus' love by seeking to love those around me more.

Living this way, is not always easy. Sooner or later we will probably find ourselves in an uncomfortable place where things don't seem to be fair. In our gospel this morning the workers who had started working at the beginning of the day were paid what they had been promised, but they didn't feel that it was fair because they received the same as people who had started work much later in the day. Of course, the story is not about the pay disputes of agricultural workers - it's meant to help us understand that it doesn't matter whether we accept the good news and forgiveness offered by God early in life or late in life – it is still good and the forgiveness is complete. Unfairness is something that we will come across if we try to live like Christ and reflect God's image. People might mock us for our faith or think that we are showing some kind of weakness and at other times and in other places Christians have been forced into prison or faced torture or death just for believing. We need to be ready for this – it's another way that "to live is Christ" as Jesus Himself was criticised and attacked by the authorities of the day for what he said and did.

A different way to think about it is that when we become Christians we become a kind of hybrid – Jesus was perfectly God and Man at the same time and when we begin to follow him we take on some of that mixed nature. Whether you think about hybrid plants, animals or cars they all show some characteristics of two other things. As Christians we will show some characteristics of God and some human ones, hopefully we will show more of the Godly characteristics and metaphorically

produce bigger flowers, have a nicer temperament, and go further than people who do not have the same relationship with God.

Returning to Paul's stark verse, 'for me to live is Christ to die is gain' we have seen that to live should be a chance to live in a way that reflects God's image and shows his love to those around us. Let's turn our attention to how "to die is gain".

Culturally we are not good at talking about death, we often trying to avoid speaking about it directly, but Paul characteristically is quite blunt about it. He wants to die.

Paul wants to die because he sees that as a way to lose the restrictions of his human body, a way to stop living a life of self-denying service reflecting God. Quite probably at the time Paul wrote this letter he wanted to die because he was physically not in great health and he was facing imprisonment. But I think he also recognises that death would mean the end to a life **reflecting** God and the start of time being **with** God who he loves, it also means freedom from physical pain and the limitations of a human body, freedom from trying to encourage and correct rebellious and confused churches and believers, freedom to worship and rejoice.

Thinking of our lives as hybrids, death is when we can shake off the human part of our life becoming all that we were truly meant to be, no longer facing the drawbacks of not being fully one thing or another.

We will soon be sharing communion together during which we will remember Jesus' self-giving love, his care and compassion and his emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation. But, we will also remember His resurrection which brings new life to us; which can nourish us, heal us and strengthen us so that we are able to reflect God's image to all those we encounter and to show that for us to live is Christ.