

## Philippians 4.2-9

*Lord, send your spirit of peace and joy on us, that we may be of the same mind in you and rejoice in you, always. Amen.*

‘Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice’. These words from St Paul have inspired countless songs, hymns, and anthems. ‘Celebrate in the Lord’, says Paul, ‘because He is near, and He brings deep peace’.

It is a command: Rejoice! And it is the first of several that Paul gives to the people of Philippi, in this chapter of his letter written from the gloom of a prison cell. The word ‘rejoice’ is particularly poignant from a man facing huge difficulties and hardships in jail, and still inspiring the Philippians with his strong faith and hope.

Often, what we understand by that word, ‘rejoice’, is something that happens inside us, like joy welling up and making us happy from within. And that’s not to be dismissed; but in Paul’s world and culture, this rejoicing would have been a public celebration. The world all around, Ephesus, Philippi, Corinth and elsewhere used to organize great festivals, games, and shows, to celebrate their gods and their cities, especially the new ‘god’, Caesar himself.

So why shouldn’t the followers of King Jesus celebrate exuberantly? It’s only right after all, and we can only imagine Paul longing for celebrations from his prison cell. Celebrating Jesus as Lord encourages and strengthens loyalty and obedience to him...

But at the same time, Paul comments on the *public image* of the Christian church: ‘Let everybody know how gentle and gracious you are’, as if to say ‘let the rejoicing be not too exuberant, make it mindful of the sensitive souls and of those who are by nature quiet and reserved’.

So what does rejoicing look like, if it’s both joyful and gentle? Here are the other three commands from Paul:

1 - ‘Don’t worry about anything’ he says. ‘Pray, and God will hear you.’ And he says this because the pagan world of the Romans was riddled with anxiety. Cast yourselves back to the ancient world: who did you pray to? It was complicated. There were more than forty gods and goddesses! For a bit of fun, I looked at the complete list. Some gods are well known to this day, Jupiter, the god of thunder and the sky, Neptune, the god of the sea and the earthquakes, and Mars, of course, the god of war and fighting... But have you heard of Proserpina? The goddess of fertility, wine, and agriculture. Was she a friend or a competitor of Bacchus, I don’t know! And what about Febris? She was the goddess of fevers. Do you know Senectus? He was the god of old age. And a last one: Spes. The goddess of hope.

The problem is, all of those gods and goddesses were potentially out to get you for some offence you might have done but might not even know about! You never knew whether something bad was waiting for you just round the corner. No wonder people were anxious!

But with the God who had now revealed himself in Jesus, even if there was no guarantee against suffering, there was the *certainty* that this God was ultimately in control and would always hear and answer prayers. And Paul says we should ask God about *every* area of life, big or small. If it matters greatly to you, it matters greatly to God. And God’s peace, the deep peace in the middle of life’s

problems and storms, will keep guard around your heart and mind, says Paul, like a squadron of soldiers looking after a treasure chest.

2 - Then, Paul says, 'Rejoice about what is beautiful, true, holy, and pure'. And that speaks to us today, because it runs directly opposite to what modern media feed on: things that are untrue, unjust, vicious and blameworthy. This is not to say that we should ignore those things, but Paul seems to ask: 'Are these things true representations of God's good and beautiful world? How are you going to celebrate the goodness of the creator if you feed your mind only on the places in the world which humans have made ugly? How will you fill your mind instead with all the things that God has given us to enjoy and celebrate?'

3 - The third command is in verse 9 of the chapter: live out the gospel. Live out what you have received, learnt, and seen through me, says Paul. And peace will be given to you, the peace of God from the God of peace.

Live lives centred around God, lives centred around the King who invites us to his banquet.

The King invites the guests, and the guests don't come. So the King sends his servants to gather from all around town the ordinary people - the riff-raff, really, the blind, the lame, the prostitutes and the tax collectors.

Some would say 'How wonderful, God loves us just as we are'. But the gospels tell a different story: God does not love war, God does not love injustice, God does not love pain. When the blind and the lame came to Jesus, he did not say: 'Great, you're fine as you are!' He healed them. When the prostitutes and the tax-collectors came to him, he did not say: 'Great, you're fine as you are!', His love reached them *where* they were, but refused to let them stay *as* they were. Their lives were transformed, healed, changed.

Love wants the best for the beloved. God wants his children to change and to mature from rebellious children into thoughtful disciples who will in turn change the world. So, when a man comes to the banquet wearing his dirty clothes and not even bothering to wear clean robes, he is one who joins in the feast but refuses to be transformed by God. He refuses the new heart, the new spirit, of which we hear in the words of the prophets.

Ezekiel conveys the message from God: 'Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Turn, then, and live.' (Ezekiel 18) There is *life* in turning our lives around. Rejoice!

The man who refuses all the implications of the King's invitation does not get to *live*. He gets thrown into the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Many are called, few are chosen, many do not even bother responding.

Do we fully respond to God's invitation? Do we let go of all pride, anxiety, unholiness, and admit humbly before God that we need His help? Do we let God transform us?

Paul invites us to reflect on our lives, turn around to get ourselves a new heart and a new spirit. He invites us to let God know what we want. And as we pray and make requests, let us give thanks as well. Let us rejoice in the Lord always. And God's peace, which is greater than we can ever understand, will keep guard over our new hearts, minds, and spirits in King Jesus.

In this there is life.