

Reading – Philippians chapter 1 v 21 – 30

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better, but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Only live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well – since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Reflection

There are many inspirational hymns and spiritual songs to enjoy, based on scripture. 'For me to live is Christ to die is gain' is a song that I enjoy with a happy tune and easy words to remember.

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

To take his hand and walk his narrow way.

There is no peace, no joy, no thrill

Like walking in his will.

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

However, we should not take the verse out of context. Paul talks very seriously about the probability of his own death, as he writes from prison as a prisoner. The choice was not his, as his life or death could go either way. Paul sees life as an opportunity for serving Christ and he sees death as the route to a deeper experience of Christ. As Paul mulls over this in the chapter he concludes that remaining in the body with all its attendant hardships and imperfections is the greater need as Paul considers the situation and his readers. There was work to be done in helping them in their Christian faith and in spreading the gospel among a wider circle. However, he did look forward to full communion with Christ in the world to come.

What can we learn about 'ensuring our progress and joy in the faith', from the reading today?

The church in Philippi was loved dearly by Paul. From the letters we see that he enjoyed a warm fellowship in the spreading of the gospel with them, and he longed to have a future visit. The prompt for his writing was to thank them for the generosity of the financial gift they had delivered to him in prison via Epaphroditus. He would reply and send Timothy to them. At the heart of the letter is Paul's call to the Philippians to let 'their conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ'.

We are experiencing separation during various degrees of restrictions and lockdowns. Paul would want to meet lots of people again. Lydia – the seller of purple. In the early days Paul had met a group of God-fearing gentile women meeting in a place of prayer. Paul had been thrown into prison on his first visit and on his release the jailer and all his family believed. These and many others would have prompted Paul to write 'that I shall remain and stand by you to ensure your progress and joy in the faith'. Just as the work of mission can show progress, so too can the faith of the individual.

Although we are separated in so many ways just now, we can pause to reflect on those people we have known in our own lives to help us come into a greater experience of fullness of life in Christ. And, even in these times we can rejoice to see others grow in their faith.

Secondly Paul develops his thinking on discipleship. 'Walking the Way Living the life of Jesus today' says that the literal meaning for a disciple in Greek is 'one who learns along the way'. Paul goes on to say – 'Whatever happens, let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ'. They were living under Roman rule, a bit like a police state. But Paul says – 'Philippians, live out your blood-bought heavenly citizenship'.

Paul talks about sufferings. There had never been a good environment for the gospel in Philippi. The little Roman polis declared war on Paul and his converts. From day one he was beaten up. But years later Christianity spread all over the globe. It is strange to witness how much havoc a virus can create across the world today It changes everything and makes life much harder and alters relationships. We must interpret – 'the rule of six' this week and balance finances with health and limit socialising. We are caught up in the struggle of keeping our church community together through this time and continuing to communicate the love of God. The ways are new to us and need perseverance and learning new skills. Paul's stance was sharing the good news – the preaching of Christ – and in lives that proved worthy of the gospel. Let us continue to give hope as we all try to find ways through the pandemic. For with faith comes a joy that triumphs over human afflictions.

Thirdly they were encouraged to show spiritual steadfastness. In these tough times, we do need the joyful energy of the Holy Spirit to hold us loving and steadfast, keeping a song in our hearts and uniting us in a common purpose and mission. Paul also talks about fearlessness, 'I may hear that you are standing firm, united in spirit and in mind, side by side in the struggle to advance the gospel faith, meeting your opponents without so much as a tremor'.

Fourthly, Paul talks in verses 29 and 30 about, the grace of worthy citizenship. The verse seems relevant today also – 'For you have been granted the privilege of believing in Christ but also of suffering for him'.

And so, may we accept all that God has in store for us, all the ups and downs and encourage one another in our faith. Like Paul and the Philippians in the early church, we need to spend time in drawing down the refreshing times with the Lord in prayer and meditation and our reading of scripture. For God cares in a holistic way for each one of us;

emotionally; spiritually; physically and mentally. Sometimes we will need professional help. But let us encourage one another in the faith. May we have a joyful forbearance in living out our Christian lives.

Prayer.

Loving God,

We pray for our communities. Thanks for our fellowship. Help us as we adapt to different ways of socialising. The rule of six is but a small price to pay to help keep ourselves and others safe. Thanks for those who help keep open our communications. In our prayers, we pray for success by the scientists who seek to find a vaccine. We pray for those who are working round the clock to seek to contain the pandemic. We remember those who are unwell and seek professional help. Be with those who work to keep our streets safe. Be with all young people as they return to their education. May we find a way to a green and stable economy. Guide us in how we can make life easier and more joyful for others. Keep us joyful and steadfast in our faith, and together as a congregation. Amen.