

God of life, may these spoken words be faithful to the written word, and lead us to the living word; Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

How are we to live in these times? These days of anxiety, and loss, and anger, of insecurity, disconnection and existential threat. These days of political strangeness.

And that's just what is happening out there. Each of us has a world in our own heads as well. Vladimir Lenin once observed that **there are decades where nothing happens and there are weeks where decades happen.**

Each week of 2020 has a history all of its own.

So, how are we to live in these times? As Christians we are called to be salt and light, ambassadors for Christ in the world. Not to retreat from it but to engage with it, and that's undoubtedly challenging, but it always has been. When Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, in the middle of the 1st century, he was writing into a context that was fiercely loyal to the Roman Emperor. And there was a reason for it. That city had battled for the Emperor; they had shed their blood in the cause of the Emperor, because there had been an uprising inspired by the murder of Julius Caesar, and they had taken the Emperor's side.

In Philippi the Emperor was the true and only Lord of all. No opposition was allowed. The politics, here, didn't not favour Christians, you can appreciate. You need to read Paul's letter to the church at Philippi, against that background, and count the number of times that Paul refers to the 'Lord' Jesus. Let the reader understand.

Paul, of course, had a spell in a Philippian gaol and he writes this letter, to the church at Philippi, from another one, possibly Rome or Ephesus. The letter is remarkable because it has a sense of joy and positive spirit throughout. In fact, the word is used 16 times.

And in the verses we heard this morning, Paul gives three blocks of exhortation to the church at Philippi, about how they should live.

First, he says, will you please help Euodia and Syntyche to sort out their differences, because disagreement sucks a community of its energy and frankly doesn't commend the gospel. Second, he says cultivate some

inner dispositions, and thirdly he comes up with a really interesting piece on values to live by. I want to focus briefly on the second section, in the inner dispositions.

In recent Leadership literature there has been an increasingly strong emphasis, not on what leaders do, but the way that they are in themselves. And this is precisely what Paul is talking about regarding the Christian life. And he encourages them to cultivate a triple capacity, if you like.

Firstly, in verse four: **rejoice in the Lord always**. Interestingly, in the first century, that wouldn't have been heard as an individual thing, but as a corporate thing. He would have been looking at the Ancient world and the fact they loved their festivals, and Paul is saying, why don't you take a lesson from the Ancient world, from our world, and why don't you turn your worship into a festival, if you like.

He is drawing, also, on the Jewish tradition, that the joy of the Lord is our strength. That's what the teaching of the Old Testament points us too. And of course, joy in the New Testament isn't something that I summon up in myself, that I kind of dredge up from somewhere deep inside me. It's actually a gift of God, that constantly resides within me.

So, this isn't a kind of spirituality of smiley, emoji faces, although, of course, smiling is allowed within the Christian church! It's something a little bit more profound than that. It is what happens when sinners encounter grace; when we know that the Lord is near, that his word is addressing us. That ignition when we come alive to the presence of God. In Greek, the word for joy is chara and the word for grace is charis; they come from the same root. So when we call this service 'eu-char-ist' we are joining both of those together. And even in these COVID days, when we wear masks and are socially distant, and maybe watching this on your own, hundreds of miles away from Bradford... the Lord is near.

Rejoice. This is the disposition of joy.

Second, **let your gentleness be known**. This is such a different word to use: let your gentleness be known. It's a word that's used in ancient Greek to refer to nobility and the way that they might be at their best towards people, in judgement and rule. It's the very opposite of taking advantage, or bullying. It's the attitude that treads lightly on the planet and on the holy territory that is another's life. It is a nurturing and winsome characteristic, that looks to put others in touch with God.

And then finally; and as you know, all sermons are preached first and foremost to the preacher, verse six: **do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving; let your request be made known to God**. The ancients were worriers because the Gods were

unpredictable. You were never quite sure if you had offended a god and how they might react. And of course superstition gets bound up with that as well.

But for many of us anxiety is a big issue. We battle with ourselves and we struggle with the Bible texts that tell us not to worry!

We live in the past, maybe guilt, maybe regret, or we live in the future - what might happen. We are not present to the present. The antidote, of course, is to live in the present moment, practicing the sacrament of the present. But we're also invited to name those things that cause us anxiety, offering those things to God in prayer, and I think Tom Wright's dictum here is very, very helpful because often we think that's not worthy of taking to God: God's not going to be interested in that. Tom Wright's dictum is helpful: if it matters to you, it matters to God. And, however the God of peace chooses to answer our prayers, the Lord is near, and your **heart and your mind** will be guarded; will be protected.

So here is a vision of how we should live: the church as joy, as gentleness, as anxiety-free zone. That's seems to me to be a winner in these days. But so are those fantastic values, which we see in **verse eight**, a combination of Jewish wisdom and Greek philosophy that reflects the best in human beings. Amidst all of last week's bad news there were some fantastic stories in the Queen's Birthday Honours – stories of ordinary people who just got on with being great and lovely human beings. And you can get the force of this when you read those verses: **finally beloved, whatever's true; whatever's honourable; whatever's just; whatever is pure; whatever is pleasing; whatever is commendable. If there is any excellence, and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.**

How are we to live? It's all here. But this is more than a recipe for the church, it's about being the best human beings we can be. And I hear the words of Marilyn Robinson, the great author and philosopher, ringing in my ears.... **I miss civilisation and I want it back.** Amen.