

17th Sunday after Pentecost 2023 Philippians 1:21-30. All joy and peace.

Today we are looking at our reading from Paul's wonderful and unique letter to the Philippians. It is often called the book of joy, as the word occurs fifteen or so times in four short chapters.

Philippi is in Northeast Greece, about 100 kms south of the Bulgarian border and the church there supported and loved the apostle Paul, which is why this letter is filled with warm affection and love. (If you would like to know more about how Paul went to Philippi and what he did there, open up the book of Acts at chapter 16 and start reading.)

Philippians, along with Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon, is one of what we call the *Prison Letters*. Paul was in prison in Ephesus, Caesarea, and Rome, and its most likely he wrote this when imprisoned in Rome, probably written about 60-62 AD, so the church in Philippi was only about ten years old when he wrote this letter to them.

It begins with Paul thanking God for them and to reassure them that he is "constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you" (v.3). He goes on to reassure the Philippians that his being put in jail is actually a good thing, because it has helped to spread the gospel. The word has spread through the whole imperial guard about Christ! Paul rejoices in this.

So this is the context of today's reading; Paul rejoicing in a Roman jail under threat of execution. He eventually was executed somewhere around c.65ad, when he was beheaded under the emperor Nero, who also executed the apostle Peter.

Now the first half of today's reading deals with the great question of what happens when we die. Paul was in prison with the possibility of execution over him and with plenty of time to pray about it.

This is what he would share with a church he truly loved: that 'whether we live or die, we live and die in Christ' (Rom 14:8).

Now Paul was waiting for Rome to decide whether or not it would be better if he lived or died. Paul says amazingly in today's reading that he agrees with them!

Paul says today in vv. 20-21 that Christ will be exalted in Paul's body whether Paul lives or dies. Another way to say it that Jesus, King of Kings, will gain a great reputation through Paul's body whether in life or death.

So Paul writes "to live is Christ and dying is gain!" Peter writes in his letters that even though we can't see Jesus, we love him (1Peter 1:8). We love to be with the people we love. Paul is saying if I die, I get to be with Jesus whom I love, how wonderful is that!

But this is not some death-wish to escape this horrible live on earth. On the contrary, life in this world in Christ is wonderful too, which is why he writes in vv. 22-23 'that do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two.' He is torn.

Of course whether we live or whether we die is not up to us. We can live as healthily and as safely as we can and still have no say in it. Paul is saying hold loosely to life, to live is to live in the joy of Christ, and to die is to continue to live in the joy of Christ.

Paul wants to reassure his little fledgling church in Philippi that if he dies, don't think that something has gone wrong. Know that Jesus is sovereign over the affairs of the empires of the world.

Jesus proved it by his resurrection and Paul wants his beloved Philippians to know that whatever happens, whether he lives or dies, he personally will be full of joy and he wants to impart that same joy to the ones he loves.

Keeping all of that in mind sets up the second part of this morning's reading. Paul is saying to the church that if you keep in the faith of Jesus you too may suffer as I am suffering, but in the eternal scheme of things it doesn't matter. Nothing, including death, can separate you from Christ. If Christ is for you, who can be against you? (Romans 8).

In the second part of the reading Paul tells the church that the big and only thing is to 'live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ ... 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' (vv. 27-28).

When I was a boy, dogs seemed to be able to get away with things that today the council would act on. When we were riding home from school, depending on which way we went, we would come across cranky dogs who regularly bit people. The advice back then was "don't show them you're scared, or they'll have you."

Paul is saying when people take offense at your faith, and they will, don't become defensive and back away, you'll just get bitten. Be tolerant, gracious and polite and if they ask you what you believe in, tell them; Jesus Christ. Jesus offended many people and continues to offend many people.

The living God is looking after us and life can be so beautiful it makes us weep. We are to remember when Paul says, 'to live is Christ!' He does so emphatically and with great joy!

The important thing is to do all we can to maintain the solid unity of spirit and intention. Paul uses the example of a team, a sporting team perhaps, all working together, equally intent on the outcome. That's what Paul means by 'striving side by side.'

Our public behaviour, how we live in the world is really important. Paul says, 'live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' (v.27). If we have integrity in our public behaviour and love others in a true and fair dinkum way, our behaviour will be beyond criticism.

Paul is saying that Jesus is the new King, most people don't realise it yet, but those of us who do must hold our nerve and remain loyal to him. And this very loyalty, this holding of our nerve, will itself be a sign that the message we are proclaiming is true.

When we do that we will find that life in Christ is not a chore trying to be "good", it has nothing to do with that. We will find that life is filled with joy. Let me pray...