

20th Sunday after Pentecost 2023. Philippians 4:1-9 Joy in the Peace of God

Today we conclude our four-part series on Paul's letter to the Philippians by looking at how we can experience lasting joy through the peace of God that truly does pass all understanding.

Last week's reading ended with Paul using the image of a very long race to picture the Christian life as one of constantly moving into God's future, always pressing forward. Here, he begins his final urging to the Philippians quite differently: "Stand firm in the Lord!" Pressing forward and standing firm in one place; how are these images to be reconciled?

I think the answer is right there in the place he is urging them to stand firm - "in the Lord." The best way I can try and explain this is that 'in the Lord,' our forward movement is like our constant movement on the surface of an earth that is in space. We are held fast by gravity at the centre yet at the same time spinning at tremendous speed, constantly in motion yet constantly at rest.

Without this centre of gravity, this grounding in the settled presence of Christ among us, the picture of the life of faith as a race could become frenetic and destructive. Pressing forward always, but grounded in Christ.

Given the pace of most of our lives, we do not need more frantic activity. We need, rather, to rest in Christ's presence at each moment, neither nostalgically or self-pityingly looking back, nor fantasizing about a future we cannot yet see. When we 'rest' in Christ, we find that we are carried forward really quite quickly indeed, yet at the same time there is always enough time for what truly needs to be done.

What needs to be done, in Paul's view, is to live by the promise that Christ *will* transform us, and *will* subject all things to himself (Philippians 3:21). This promise has quite specific effects in the present, and in today's reading, Paul lists three main ways in which Christ Jesus brings about this transformation.

By reconciling us to each other within the church; by nurturing good habits of the heart and mind (4:4-7 and 8-9); and finally this reconciliation and nurturing open us up to the peace of God (4:7), which is nothing less than his very presence.

First, Paul pleads with two women leaders at Philippi who apparently are at odds with each other to reconcile. We know nothing else about Euodia or Syntyche but they are obviously leaders of the church. We do know that they were valued fellow missionaries who had shared Paul's struggles.

We also know that Paul's plea for reconciliation comes out of his urging that we adopt the "the mind of Christ," that we looked at two weeks ago in Philippians 2:1-5. Just as Paul

generally urged the Philippians to "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind," so now he brings it home in a specific situation of discord.

He also lists Euodia and Syntyche among those "whose names are in the book of life." This is an unusual expression in Paul's letters, but its appearance here causes us to ponder the way the hope of eternal life encourages us to be reconciled to our fellow Christians. We will, after all, be spending eternity with them!

Second, Paul commands us to rejoice! (v.4). Get into good habits of the heart and mind. Despite this being the most joyful of all Paul's letters, this command from Paul always surprises me because he wrote it amidst the horrors of a Roman prison.

The reason is not difficult to find: "The Lord is near" (v.5). Paul expects the imminent return of Christ, who will put all things right. But as we have seen throughout the letter, Paul also experiences the nearness of God in Christ, even in his present captivity. So he commands us to rejoice in a way that lets our gentleness be evident to all; which is how they will know the velvet gentleness of God in Jesus Christ.

When we rejoice, we do so in a way where our rejoicing doesn't become an exuberance that turns into a sort of false extrovert enthusiasm. Unfortunately I have seen it, and it is pretty horrible. E.g., "God didn't heal you of your disease? Rejoice!"

Be gentle as God is gentle with us. Don't crush the Lilly in souls more sensitive than our own. In fact this extrovert enthusiasm often can be a sign of great spiritual immaturity. God loves babies for sure, but he wants us to grow up in our faith.

And since we are beset with anxieties that get in the way of rejoicing, he tells us to pray in *every* situation, bringing *everything*, no matter how trivial or how seemingly insurmountable, to the God who loves us. We cannot generate freedom from anxiety by our own efforts; the attempt only pushes the anxiety underground, where it festers and leads to a sort of secret despair.

But Jesus meets us at the place of worry, because he has descended to the depths of human despair. Therefore God has become for us the God whose peace "guards and protects" our minds and hearts (v.7). *APBA* uses the word 'keeps'. This is wonderful and miraculous.

Finally, Paul tells us to focus our minds on what is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. Is this just an exercise in positive thinking? Is it a childish denial of reality? If it wasn't for the resurrection, I think that might be the case. But, knowing the power of the resurrection we spoke about last week, I think Paul is holding two realities in view at the same time.

Yes, there is the immediate reality of a world in which human beings are constantly at war somewhere, betraying one another, brutally suppressing each other in order to get ahead. We have the reality of dysfunctional governments and fake news.

This was true of the Roman Empire, every other age, and it is true today and perhaps even worse. Every day we hear and see a culture that focuses on what is false, dishonourable, unjust, impure, and shameful. We begin to think that to act hopefully in such a world is unrealistic.

But Paul also sees another reality. The reality seen through the lens of knowing the power of the resurrection, and this is the reality that holds the future. That is, the reality of God's redemption through Jesus, already here and at the same still drawing near.

Training our minds to think of this reality, and thereby to act with hope, is a daily mental discipline, a habit of the mind. To do this we need to experience the true reality of God's kingdom coming to reign in our relationship with God in Jesus Christ and by the power of the Spirit, and in our relationships with each other. Just like Paul's relationship with the Philippians (v.9).

Paul promises that the result of these habits of heart and mind is "peace that surpasses all understanding." Written from jail, by a man under threat of capital punishment at the hands of a brutal and corrupt regime, these are extraordinary promises. We too, though not in prison, live in really uncertain times. Paul is saying in effect what it means to know the power of the resurrection. Where does the 'peace of God' come from (v.7)? From the 'God of peace' of course (v.9). Get to know the one, and you will have the other. The complete and utter joy of knowing the peace of God.

When we experience that, we want for nothing, are anxious about nothing, and live for everything that has real and true meaning, because in the ultimate victory of the God of peace, he encourages us to have quiet minds and hopeful hearts. Let me pray...