

September 20th 2026

16th Sunday after Trinity

10.30am Morning Prayer All Saints Oakham

Psalm 105.1-6, 37-e, Exodus 16.2-15, Philippians 1

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer.

When the apostle Paul was travelling around the Mediterranean on his missionary journeys, he had a certain way of doing things – a *modus operandi* if you like. Basically, he started with the Jewish congregation in whatever city he found himself in, and argued that Jesus was their long-expected Messiah. This usually resulted in a number of converts to what was becoming known as “The Way” particularly, it would seem amongst the proselytes – those non-Jews who found the Jewish faith attractive. Paul would stay for many months and even years, teaching these folk about Jesus and establishing the church in that place. This usually eventually often led to protests from either the leaders of the Jewish synagogue or from the wider population, that sometimes turned violent, requiring Paul and his followers to get out of town as quickly as they could, leaving a small group of Christians behind. Paul would then keep in touch with them by the exchange of letters.

The establishment of the church at Philippi followed something of this pattern. Whilst travelling around Asia Minor, modern day Turkey, Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia calling to him. Macedonia was on the other side of the Bosphorus and was thus in Europe, with Philippi being one of its chief cities. Paul and his companions travelled there and on the first Sabbath they were there went to a place of prayer by a riverside. There they met a prosperous and influential lady called Lydia, a cloth dealer and it would seem a gentile follower of the Jewish faith, who was to become one of their first converts. A church was established that met at her house and rapidly grew. At some point afterwards, Paul and his companion Silas came across a young girl fortune teller possessed by a rather vociferous spirit, who he seems to have exorcised, much to the chagrin of her masters for whom she was a source of income. The crowd was stirred up and Paul and Silas were thrown into prison. The story of their release isn't for now, but when they got out of jail, it seemed to them time to get out of Philippi as quickly as they could. They then travelled down the Greek peninsula, and we read that the same pattern – preaching, establishing a church, violence and escape – repeated itself a number of times.

It seems that Paul never got back to his young church at Philippi although they clearly kept in touch. But Paul faced ever increasing opposition as he travelled around the area, and suffered a number of terms of imprisonment. It is from one of those times when he

was in prison that Paul's letter to the Philippian church belongs, and which we begin reading through today. Clearly from the tone of the letter Paul fears that potentially his end is approaching and that his life is in danger. I guess the majority view amongst biblical commentators is that the letter was written in Rome during Paul's imprisonment there which did probably result in his death, although there are other possibilities. Whatever the timing of the letter, Paul clearly thought he was facing death as he wrote these words. The implication of this is that Paul wrote about what he thought were the important things, the ideas and concepts he needed urgently to communicate to this young church in Philippi. The church there seem to have been facing persecution in some way at that time and Paul writes to instruct and encourage them. As such I think what Paul is trying to communicate in this letter is of very real importance to Christians down the ages – the guts of Paul's message if you like. So it speaks to us as much as it spoke to the Philippians 2000 years ago.

So what is the letter saying?

Well firstly, and frivolously, we read in the opening salutation.

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons

The saints, the holy ones, the ordinary Christians on one side and the bishops on the other, with the implication that the two are mutually exclusive. I just leave that there for you to ponder!

But then onto more serious stuff. He prays for those at Philippi

that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless.

Here Paul seems to be addressing individual Christians at Philippi, praying for them to love both one another and their God, but also to grow in knowledge and insight and purity – to seek to become more and more like Christ. A prayer for their personal growth and discipleship. He isn't here calling them to any great action, but rather calling them to deepen their relationship with God – to grow in knowledge, presumably through scripture reading, to understand more and more who God is through prayer so they may live a life of ever increasing purity. And those thoughts are as relevant for us as they were to the early church.

Then as he describes his own situation in prison, he tells them how in many ways this has helped with the proclamation of the gospel – amongst the Imperial Guard, and in giving boldness to those Christians around him to witness effectively. And the good news of Jesus was being spread more widely as a result. The motives of some weren't always as pure as they might have been, but nonetheless the gospel was proclaimed.

Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

The lesson there seems to be that the work of the church doesn't stop because the circumstances are difficult, the gospel still needs to be proclaimed. And the lesson there for us is obvious – even in an interregnum our mission continues, and we need to spread the good news of Jesus and to make disciples in whatever way we can – in word and in deed.

That last quote leads us onto one of the dominant themes in the letter - a call to rejoice and to praise God in all circumstances

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will result in my deliverance.

He then goes on to describe his current feelings about the future in quite extraordinary terms

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.

Even facing death, he was able to address the future in a positive way and even to rejoice. And that too is of course importance, both as we face our own mortality and as we face and offer praise in difficult circumstances in our current situation.

So the passage urges us to **personal prayer**, to continued **proclamation** of the gospel, to continue to rejoice and **praise**. Three p's there, even if a bit forced – I am quite proud of that! I may make a preacher yet. But there is a fourth p. This whole passage is written with an eternal perspective.

the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ

so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless,

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.

Paul is always looking ahead, to what will be on the day of the Lord, to life beyond the confines of this world. And it is that **perspective** that is so very important to us. Next week we will be celebrating the feast of St Michael and all angels, an important feast in my view, primarily because it encourages us to look up, to grab hold of this perspective, that there is a heavenly reality as well as an earthly one. And it is that perspective that offers light and hope in the darkest of places.

In the last paragraph of our reading Paul seems to take a breath and he writes

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.

A call to live the sort of life that God wants us to – a life that reflects the commandments that we read earlier in the service if you like – and to stand side by side in unity. He goes on to expand this in Chapter 2. Because we will celebrate Michaelmas next week, we won't read this in church, which is a shame as it seems to me that it is one of the most important passages in scripture. Which is an excuse for reading it now.

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

*who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

*Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

So, Paul writes, let this same mind be in you as was in Christ Jesus the call to be servants to one another, loving one another, putting the needs of others before our own, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who died so we might be forgiven, the one with a name above all names – Jesus means Yahweh saves. The “I am what I am” who took human flesh – the one to whom all knees will bow, and acknowledge his Lordship.

As he faced his own death, Paul wanted the Philippians to understand the need for them personally to grow closer to God, the continuing need to proclaim the gospel through good

and bad, the need to rejoice and praise God in all things, and the need for them to hold on to that eternal perspective, that their ultimate future is safe with God. And this leads on to him calling them to take Jesus as their pattern in their love and service, and to acknowledge him, the name above all names, as their Lord and Saviour. And these things are important for us to grasp and understand too.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen