

## Sermon Phil 4:1-9.

We've reached the end of our short sermon series on St Paul's letter to the Philippians, and today we look at chapter 4:1-9 – an ending....

I read a story about an elderly couple who wanted to try out new things while they still had time. One of the things they'd never done was to go up in a plane looping the loop. They approached the local airport and were put in touch with a pilot. She said, yes, I can do that for you, but it'll be a £1000. Fred and Mary didn't have that sort of money and so reluctantly said no. The pilot made them an offer. She said, ok, I'll take you up for free as long as you don't say a word – but if you say one single thing, it'll be £1000 – Fred and Mary agreed. They took to the skies, soared around, did loop the loops, everything. Not a word from the back – the pilot repeated it, expecting some comment, some oohs, aahs, even a few screams. Nothing. After they landed the pilot said through the intercom. I tried everything to get you to say something – what was going on? To which Fred replied, well I did think about saying something when Mary fell out, but £1000's a lot of money!

I love a happy ending, don't you?

We continue where we left off last week (or not!) where Paul talked about completing the race – he hadn't reached the end yet, and I asked which is the only race where the competitors stop at the finish line – swimming. Another ending In a sense, withing today's passage we are told to stop – or rather to stand firm (v1). So which is it, are we to press on to the goal to win the prize (ch 3:14) or to stand firm – reaching the end, as we shall see, the answer is both!

Before we look at the passage today in a bit more detail – the key phrase here is 'in the Lord' (3:1) – It's a bit like standing on a moving train – are you moving or not? We are centred, fixed, yet we are heading towards our destination. For us as Christians, our centring is the settled presence through the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ in us, and the danger without is for life to become frenetic and rushed. Given the pace of most contemporary life, we certainly do not need more frantic activity. We need, rather, to rest in Christ's presence at each moment, neither nostalgic for the past nor fantasizing about a future we cannot yet see. When we do so, we find that Christ carries us forward very 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. It issues in a call to reconciliation between warring church members (4:2-3). It nurtures habits of the heart (4:4-7) and habits of the mind (4:8-9) that open us to the peace of God (4:7), which is indeed the presence of the God of peace (4:9).

So, v2-3 First, Paul pleads with two women leaders at Philippi who apparently are at odds with each other. We know nothing else about them, nor about the "loyal companion" whom Paul asks to help. What we do know is that they were valued fellow missionaries who had shared Paul's struggles. They thus provide evidence for the leadership roles of women in Paul's churches.

We also know that Paul's plea for reconciliation draws on his earlier depiction of "the mind of Christ," in Philippians 2:1-5. Just as Paul generally exhorted 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 be spending a long time with them!

Second (v4-7), Paul commands us to rejoice! Again, how surprising this is, coming from the horrors of a Roman prison. The reason is not difficult to find: "The Lord is near." 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.

And since we are beset with anxieties that get in the way of rejoicing, he tells us to pray in *everything*, bringing everything, no matter how trivial or how insurmountable, to the God who loves us. We cannot generate freedom from anxiety by our own efforts; the attempt only pushes the anxiety underground, and this can harm us, as I know to my cost. But Jesus will meet us at the place of worry, because he has been here, experienced what we experience, as we saw in chapter 2. Note what verse 7 doesn't say. It doesn't say make an effort to guard your minds, make an effort to somehow generate God's peace in yourself. No. This is an eternal promise, which is why Paul begins v4 with the word 'and' – it is a consequence of prayer, petition, thanksgiving, making requests to God (v6). God has become for us in Jesus the God whose peace "guards" our minds and hearts.

Third (v8-9), Paul tells us to focus our minds on what is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise. This time there is an instruction. There's so much around, on the internet, TV, radio, newspapers, in our lives and relationships which is false, dishonouring, unjust, impure, bad.

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, and so forth. This was true of the Roman Empire, this was therefore Paul's experience, and it is true today. We have a choice, a choice how to train our minds, and that affects our behaviour, and our relationships. Paul sees another reality, and it is the reality that holds the future. Paul didn't just teach this, he demonstrated this – look again at verse 1 – he describes his Christian brothers and sisters in Philippi as people he longs and lives for, his job and crown. I'm sure as we see in the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche which threatened to disrupt unity in the church family things weren't always rosy. But that's exactly the point – He didn't tell them to ignore difference, nor to wait for the other to admit they were wrong, but to sort things out for the sake of the gospel. This is not cheap grace, but costly sacrificial love.

As we end our study of Philippians...

Over the next (couple of) week(s) we hold our annual church meetings, in challenging times. Things are different, often referred to as the new normal. Changes have already happened, and we'll need to take important decisions to share the love of Christ with our communities.

If we are, as brothers and sisters that make up the family of the church, to stand fast in the face of the challenges around us, then our personal faith in Jesus, the state of our hearts and lives is something we might need to pay attention to, modelling our relationships on Jesus Christ, coming among us after leaving the throne of heaven, focusing on prayer, godly thinking and focusing on the word of God.

As we do all this, my prayer is that the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. In that way, the God of peace will be with us. Amen.