

Pentecost 17A (27 September 2020)

How to find joy despite suffering - Philippians 1:12-30

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- **1:12-30 How to find Joy despite Suffering**

Nelson Mandela spent 28 years of his life as a political prisoner in apartheid South Africa. A story is told that after he was released and elected South Africa's first black president, he was eating lunch at a restaurant surrounded by his bodyguards. He recognised a man at a table next to his and invited him to join his group for lunch. The man came over and joined his table but as they ate their meals with joy, their guest's hands were trembling and he didn't say a word. After a while the guest rose, thanked the president for his kindness, and left.

Nelson's bodyguards assumed their guest was sick. To this, Nelson Mandela shook his head and said the man was his former jailer. He'd treated him particularly badly and subjected him to all kinds of harassment and suffering. Perhaps he thought Mandela was going to take revenge on him that day but instead the president joyfully broke bread with his former jailor.

Nelson Mandela is probably the best example in recent history of how we can find joy through suffering. Today we're going to think about someone else who found joy in jail and who, like Mandela, brought a message of hope that has changed our world.

- **1:12-18a Being in prison is no obstacle to joy because the gospel is preached**
-Imprisonment

Our reading today begins in Philippians 1:12 where a man named Paul writes:

"Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel."

(Philippians 1:12)

Now you might be asking what has happened to Paul?

Well as we saw last week Paul had met Jesus shortly after he died and rose again and his life was changed in a moment. Paul went from trying to destroy Christianity to preaching Jesus as the true ruler of the world, which was a message that got him landed in jail and sent to Rome.

Now this may have seemed like the worst thing that could possibly happen to Paul and for the spread of the gospel. He could no longer preach publicly or plant churches and he travels to Rome not as a missionary but as a prisoner and is placed under house arrest.

He's guarded and sometimes chained to soldiers from the Roman imperial guard. Big tough guys with muscles and brains to boot. Two guards would watch him in four hour shifts, 24 hours a day.

Now you'd think this sort of suffering would have lead Paul to give up on his mission and possibly on God too. But instead of giving up Paul begins writing letters to his friends and shares his love for Jesus with his guards. He can't go anywhere but his letters can. He can't speak publicly but he has a captive audience of two new highly intelligent and powerful soldiers every four hours, 24 hours a day.

And so Paul writes:

"As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear."

(Philippians 1:13–14)

Some of Paul's jailers are starting to follow Jesus and the Christians in Rome are hearing about this and becoming more bold too. If someone wanted to stop Paul, it's backfired and he's rejoicing that while prison wasn't his plan, God is using his suffering to change lives.

-Envy and rivalry

The other thing Paul is suffering is an attack on his reputation. It seems preachers in Philippi, have taken advantage of Paul's being in jail. They're jealous of him and are trying to steal his friends, the people who are sending him money to buy food while he's in jail.

Paul writes in v.17 that these people:

“preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.”

(Philippians 1:17)

Now while there's debate over who exactly these people are it's clear that:

- 1. They are preaching Christ, so they're preaching truth about Jesus rather than lies.
- 2. Their motives are wrong. They're doing what they're doing for themselves rather than for God.

Now Paul could have seen this as a disaster but again he's found joy in suffering so it's water off a duck's back.

“But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.”

(Philippians 1:18)

While these preachers might have the wrong motives, he can rejoice because Christ is being preached. “So what they hate me?” says Paul, if they're telling people about Jesus it's all good!

Friends this passage has an important application for Anglicans today. We often hear about Priests and Christian leaders whose private sins become public. When this happens the question comes, if these people were bad does this mean that my faith is somehow broken. If this person baptised me, or helped me become a leader, or I sat under their teaching does this taint my faith somehow?

Paul says no to this. If someone preaches the truth, even if their motives are false, then the fruit of their preaching is still good. This truth is so important that in the 1600s when Anglican theologians wrote the 39 Articles of faith, a summary of what Anglicans believe the 26th article revolved around the fact that neither the sacraments nor the ministry of 'evil men' were invalid even if they were preaching Christ for themselves rather than God.

-He's seeing the gospel advance

- **1:18b-26 Life in Christ is life for others**
-Laying my life down for Christ

So Paul's given us two examples of how God's gifted him joy through his sufferings but it seems there's one more thing on his mind: death.

Paul is facing the death penalty on false charges but again this won't rob him of his joy. Jesus was killed for his message and Paul knows that if he's preaching Christ he may meet the same fate.

Here we see how meeting Jesus, changed Paul's life but also the way he thought about life. His life is not his own now, instead everything he has belongs to Christ, and he's laying it all down.

This realisation that our lives are not our own is vital if we're to find joy in life. If we live for our own comfort, then every threat to our comfort and happiness must be eliminated at all costs. Unfortunately, when we think this way the people in our lives quickly become that threat.

When we lay our lives down, when we recognise that our lives are not our own but part of a bigger whole then relationships stop becoming a transactions designed to make me happy and become the building blocks of our lives.

There's a Chinese proverb that says:

"If you want happiness for an hour, take a nap. If you want happiness for a day, go fishing. If you want happiness for a year, inherit a fortune. If you want happiness for a lifetime, help somebody."

Living for myself makes sense if we're accidents of chemistry and biology, but if God is real and life has a purpose beyond our heartbeats then laying your life down for Christ in service is the best decision you'll ever make.

-Dying would take me to be with Jesus, but living lets me serve

From the outside it looks as if Paul's life is stuffed. If he lives he'll stay in prison and suffer or get released and keep preaching to people who will reject his

message and beat him up. On the other hand he may be executed. But Paul doesn't see it this way, instead he writes:

"I'm waiting eagerly and full of hope, because nothing is going to put me to shame. I am going to be bold and outspoken, now as always, and the king is going to gain a great reputation through my body, whether in life or in death.

²¹You see, for me to live means the Messiah; to die means to make a profit.
Philippians 1:20-22 (For Everyone Translation)

Rather than the choice between suffering and suffering, Paul is torn between two good joys. If he lives he can keep preaching the gospel and serving God's church. If he dies then he'll wake up in the presence of his saviour and that's a better option but either way he wins, because God wins.

To live is Christ, to die is gain is a dangerous idea in 2020. If this year has highlighted anything for me it's how anxious we are about death. We're terrified of viral outbreak, terrorism, and cultural Marxism and we live our lives in constant anxiety.

But friend if you're a follower of Jesus you don't need to fear death. For you, death is a promotion into glory. If you follow Jesus and put your life in his hands, then you have total security. If you are 'in Christ' then you can rejoice with Paul and say: "for me to live is Christ and to die is gain!" If you're not a Christian, then I'd love to speak with you after the service today and find out what's keeping you from Christ.

- **1:27-30 Striving together despite suffering**
-Working together

So is following Jesus just about eternal life insurance? No! If we follow Jesus then we're called to strive together with Jesus, working and witnessing together.

Paul writes in v.27:

"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ."

(Philippians 1:27)

Whether things are going well, or whether we're struggling the Bible tells us to live in response to the gospel, the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection. In public and in private we want to make our lives reflect what God has done for us.

- Are you caring for a friend or relative who is sick or in need? This reflects the way Jesus cares for his people.
- Do you work honestly and diligently in your job? This brings glory to God and reflects the hope you have.
- Do you treat strangers and the people you love with care, dignity, and respect? This is part of living in a manner worthy of the gospel.

We're encouraged at the end of v.27 to:

"stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you."
(Philippians 1:27–28)

The word picture used here is of a soldier standing shoulder to shoulder with his mates. You defend the flank of the person next to you and they have your back too. This is the type of unity we're called to in the church. This is why following Jesus is about my relationship with God but it's also about working together alongside my sisters and brothers in Christ to do God's work. Shoulder to shoulder we serve together and we don't need to fear those who oppose us because they can't touch the security we have in Christ.

-Witnessing together

As we work together we also witness together.

V.28 says:

"This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God." (Philippians 1:28)

When Christians suffer together for the gospel we show the world how good Jesus is. Remember Paul is sitting in a roman jail and many think the boot of the empire is on his neck but Paul's saying mate you need to save yourself

because one day you'll meet my God and if you live your life ignoring him, or worse, opposing him it's you who will be destroyed not me.

Jesus says in Matthew 10:28:

"Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Matthew 10:28)

When the church works together, we witness together that this world we know isn't worth living for because it's dying. This is why big, strong, and smart soldiers who were chained to a crazy man who couldn't stop talking about Jesus were becoming Christians. They could see the world around them was in deep trouble and they came to realise that Jesus had the answers they were looking for.

These soldiers in turn took the faith into Caesar's household (they were part of imperial guard after all). In Philippians 4:22 Paul writes:

"All God's people here send you greetings, especially those who belong to Caesar's household." (Philippians 4:22)

Church historians tell us that Christianity attracted the poor in Rome because Christians cared for them but also the rich because it spoke into the anxieties of rich. Paul never made it into Caesar's household but historians tell us that Caesar's wife and some of his kids became Christians which really upset the emperor. The way Paul responded to suffering made such an impact on people that they were drawn to Christ.

Friends when we work together for the gospel we witness to God's love. Jesus isn't asking you to follow him because it's safe, he calls you to follow him because it's worth it.

-Our suffering = witness to Jesus

As we discover joy in suffering, we witness to Jesus who suffered for us.

v.29-30 says:

“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.”

(Philippians 1:29–30)

Suffering for Christ is an honour. It’s a gift from God, not because God is a masochist but because we know that God can bring goodness out of any and every situation.

Romans 5 says it like this:

we ... boast in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. -Romans 5:2-5

Friends whatever 2020 has taken away from you, whatever you’ve suffered in life; God can restore tenfold. Jesus who suffered for you is suffering with you and God will use your sufferings for him for good. God works through our suffering to redeem the world. Whatever happens in life we can rest assured that with Jesus as our anchor we have nothing ultimately to fear. Follow Jesus and he will show you how to have joy despite suffering. Amen