

More lessons for the Philippians (and you and me!) Philippians 2 v 12-30

When we were last looking at the Philippians Paul was reminding them (and us) that the Lord Jesus had given up everything for us and now he tells us what should follow from that. And the first lesson is:-

“Trembling not presuming”

That might seem surprising but there is a sense in which we ought always to remember that God is Holy, and we are unworthy of Him and woe betide us if we ever start taking Him for granted. John Newton, the slave trader who became a wonderful Christian, wrote these words in his famous hymn Amazing Grace, “T’was grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved”. So, we need to keep working out what it means to honour Him as he is working in us. Above all so that we please Him in everything we do. Notice how Paul describes them as loved by him, using the same word that is used of Jesus’ love for us, a word called “agape” which is a special Christian word denoting the special Christian love that we should have for one another if we belong to Christ and which He showed to us, supremely when He died for us on the cross.

And then we go on to the second of our two lessons that we are looking at today,

“No grumbling but plenty of shining!”.

It is very easy for us, as it was for them, so spend our time grumbling and complaining about everything but we should be focussed on living a life in which others cannot find fault except it be that we put Christ first. Many, in every generation, will find that distasteful but let us make sure that there is nothing else with which they can legitimately reproach us. Let’s keep holding out the Good News of Jesus Christ to the unreceptive as Paul did once he had experienced the love of Christ. We see again how Paul’s concern is not for his own predicament in prison, probably chained to a guard or two, but for his readers spiritual welfare.

The rest of the chapter talks about two others, both of whom are good examples of what it means to shine for Christ. The first is Timothy, about whom we know a good deal. He was quite possibly a somewhat diffident character, but then who wouldn’t be, so in a sense it is probably best to see Timothy as quite normal like you and me! Notice again Paul wants good news from Timothy about the Philippians to cheer him up. That is the focus of his attention, not himself.

We see too how he commends Timothy for his concern for the welfare of the Philippians. Verse 21 is very challenging as he says how apparently everyone else, other than Timothy,

did not put Jesus Christ above their own interests. How difficult but how important that is to do. What a wonderful accolade Paul gives Timothy. And notice again how deep is Paul's concern for them that he wants to be released, not for his own sake, but so that he can go and see them again.

And then we turn for the rest of the chapter to a lesser known character called Epaphroditus. Notice that whereas Paul and Timothy seem to have had a father and son relationship, Epaphroditus is described in glowing terms, not only as his brother in Christ, but a fellow worker and fellow soldier (a reminder that the spiritual life involves spiritual warfare for which we need the weapons that Christ supplied – Ephesians 6 v 11-18).

Epaphroditus is also described as somebody who both is relaying news between the Philippians and Paul (what a vital ministry that is to keep folk in touch with one another) but also caring for Paul in circumstances which were probably dangerous and distasteful and of which many others would have been ashamed. In the midst of it all we learn that Epaphroditus has been very ill and he too seems to have been more concerned for the Philippians distress than for his own illness.

Notice how Paul does not automatically assume his recovery but attributes it to God's mercy on Epaphroditus and on Paul. Despite him ministering to Paul's needs, Paul wants to release him to be a blessing to the Philippians and thus reduce his anxiety. What a wonderful example of Godly priorities! He then finishes by emphasising how pleased they should be to see Epaphroditus again (probably quicker than they expected) and honour him for the way he has put Christ first even at the expense of his own welfare and life and to do on the Philippians behalf for Paul, what they couldn't do themselves.

Paul sets us very high standards, doesn't he? But let's remember that Paul had once been the blasphemer and was transformed by Jesus Christ into the man he became. Even if much less dramatically let's pray that increasingly Christ will transform each one of us into the kind of people who put Christ first above everything else.

Next week, God willing, Pixham will reopen for a Harvest Service and it would be lovely to see some of you there at 10.30am!

With our love and prayers

Dave and Mary