

SERMON – 16/2/20

Philippians 2:12-18

“I am glad and share my joy with you all. In the same way, you too must be glad and share your joy with me.” (Phil.2:17-18)

It's good to share. That's what we tell our kids and we know deep down that it is the right thing to do. It's good to share your sweeties and your sandwiches (although maybe not so great to try sharing an ice cream). It's good to share your time and talents too. These last few weeks we have been reflecting on something of what it means to share our faith. As Jesus called the fishermen, Peter and Andrew, James and John, to follow Him, He promised that as they went with Him He would teach them to catch people. We saw also how Peter went on to encourage those he taught to follow Christ to be ready with an answer for those who would ask them about the hope they had. We have thought about what it means, in a practical sense, to have faith in Christ and we have pondered how we know that what we believe is true and how we might persuade others of that.

As we think again today about what it actually means to share faith I want to home in on the idea of partnership, which is an important aspect of sharing and which is in fact one of the key themes of Paul's Letter to the Philippians from which we have read this morning.

Partnership was obviously a very precious thing for the apostle Paul as he languished in captivity in Rome. In the opening verses of his letter from prison to the young church in Philippi he wrote of the gratitude he felt every time he prayed for them because of their partnership in the Gospel; he also expressed his consideration of them as he wrestled over his own future – ‘I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.’ He recognises not only that the Christian life is to be lived for God but also that it is to be lived in connexion with and with due regard for our fellow believers, and that is an area that he explores a little further in the verses that we read this morning.

Christian discipleship is a partnership – it is a partnership between God and the believer; it is a partnership of interdependence that needs to be worked out within the fellowship of believers; and it is a partnership of words and

actions that is ultimately not only for the mutual benefit of Christians but for the blessing of the world around as others are persuaded to join the company of those who follow Jesus.

Let me begin this morning with Paul's exhortation to 'keep on working with fear and trembling to complete your salvation' which he says is done through God who is 'always at work in you to make you willing and able to obey his own purpose.' Do you see the partnership that he has in view here? It is a partnership, a working relationship between the believer and the Lord that leads to maturity of faith and fruitful Christian living. We are not talking here about working our way *to* salvation, trying to earn a place in God's favour – there are plenty of references elsewhere in the New Testament, not least this morning's Bible 2020 verse with which we began the service today, that make it abundantly clear that it is by God's grace alone that we are saved, not by our own works – no, Paul is encouraging the Philippians and us to recognise that once we have received the gift of salvation, that is just the *beginning* of a journey in partnership with God, a journey that leads us to an increasing Christ-likeness.

So, how is our partnership with God to be worked out? The clues, I think, are in what Paul has written here – we are 'to keep on working with fear and trembling to complete your salvation, because God is always at work in you to make you willing and able to obey his own purpose.' There are three things we need to note. Firstly, we need to 'keep on.' Most of us have a desire to make much faster progress in the Christian life than we do, and that is understandable – so often it seems to be two steps forward and one back; sometimes we even end up going backwards altogether, which is immensely frustrating. But the evil one would like nothing better than for us to throw in the towel completely and he tries to persuade us that because we appear to be getting nowhere fast we should just give up. No, says Paul – *keep on*, keep at it, God is with you all the way. Secondly, we need to walk before the Lord with 'fear and trembling.' For all Paul's intimate prayerfulness, he never loses sight of the fact that God is the Holy One, the Most High – these words 'fear and trembling' appear to have been a hallmark of Paul's as they can be seen together in a number of his writings – and *we* too must undertake the journey of faith in awe of God if we are to grow up into Christ. Yes, He is our loving heavenly Father; yes, we are taught to call Him Abba, Daddy, but He is God and we should never trivialise our relationship with Him in any way. And thirdly, we need to

allow God to have His way in us. We will complete our salvation as we allow Him to work in us to make us willing and able to obey His own purpose. I think that is what Paul means when he exhorts the Ephesians to ‘keep in step with the Spirit.’ God will not force His arm with us; He deals with us so gently but He so longs that we should become mature in faith and that will only happen as we consciously and eagerly invite Him to fulfil His purpose in us and through us.

So, first of all, let your partnership be with God – having entered into life with Christ, keep on working with fear and trembling to complete your salvation, because God is always at work in you to make you willing and able to obey his own purpose.

Then, moving on, let your partnership be with your fellow Christians. Again, this is an area of discipleship that often fails to gain a high place in our priorities as Christians. Just as there is no instant maturity in Christian discipleship but it requires to be worked at, nor is the question of building up the Body of Christ all plain sailing – quite the contrary, it is an aspect of Christian discipleship that calls for a great deal of hard work and sacrifice, because as we are all involved in the process of growing up into Christ, we are all at different stages and we are all handicapped to one degree or another by the rough edges of our sinful nature. Consequently there are a lot of bumps and bruises to be had within the fellowship of the Church. Again, just as the evil one would like nothing better than for us to give up because we are not making enough progress in the faith, so he is delighted when Christians fall out with one another and part company instead of working through their differences. I remember being struck by an image a preacher once used in a sermon I heard of individuals coming to church and sitting in their own telephone box with their own stained glass window and their own hotline to God. Nothing could be further from the biblical vision of the church as a body made up of many parts, joined together, growing together and building itself up in love.

In our passage this morning Paul develops the theme of our responsibility towards our fellow believers, giving to and receiving from one another. He speaks of the Philippian Christians learning from him not only when he is with them but also when he is away from them; he calls them not to complain about one another or argue with one another; he says that he will be proud of them on the day of Christ because it would show that all his

effort and work had not been wasted; he speaks about being poured out like an offering on the sacrifice that the Philippians' faith offers to God; and he calls them to rejoice and be glad with him in all that he is going through. Paul and the Philippians are inextricably tied up with each other in Christian fellowship even though they had only ever spent a short time in each other's company before being separated by many miles and by many years. He recognises that they belong to each other because they belong to God, that they have a responsibility towards one another under God, he for them and they for him.

In a way you could argue that it was easier for them than it is for a church like us because they didn't have to live and work with each other day by day. But that does not diminish the thrust of what Paul is teaching here and if we know some of the struggles of living and moving and having our being in close quarters in a community like this with our fellow believers, those are the specific challenges we have to work through in our context. Like Paul and the Philippians, we too have a great deal to learn from one another (much more than we often realise) about the Christian life, and we need to be prepared to listen as well as speak, to submit and to obey as well as to require and to demand. We ought to be as interested in and as joyful over the significant steps that others make in the journey of faith as we expect others to be over aspects of *our* journey. We ought to be prepared to labour just as much for the sake of others as we expect to benefit from the labours of others. Do we think of ourselves as being inextricably tied up with those with whom we sit together in church Sunday by Sunday? Do we pray regularly for one another and make an effort to discover what is going on in the lives of our fellow believers, or do we quietly close the door of our telephone box and slip out before anyone can break through the shell?

Let your partnership be with God's people – let us obey one another and submit to one another rather than complaining about each other and entering into arguments; let us rejoice and be glad for we are children of the living God.

But finally (and crucially), Paul reminds us that the purpose of our Christian discipleship is not only to enable our personal maturity, our growing up into Christ; it is not only to foster fellowship amongst believers for our mutual benefit and blessing, important though these things certainly are; it is to share the Gospel of Christ, the glad good news, with

the world around us. Paul exhorts the Philippians to ‘shine among them like stars lighting up the sky, as you offer them the message of life.’ Isn't that a fantastic image – shine like stars. In words inspired, I think, by the theologian Emil Brunner, we will sing a little later: ‘As a fire is meant for burning, so the church is meant for mission’ and that is the challenge that I want to leave you with as we close this morning. The Church should be an organisation that exists primarily for the benefit of its non-members. All of our activities – our worship, our nurture, our fellowship – although fundamentally designed to bring glory to God and although at another level aimed at benefiting those who participate in them, cannot ever be allowed to become ends in themselves but must all have as their goal the equipping of the Church to spread the light. Not that our services should necessarily be in themselves always overtly evangelistic; not that our gatherings for prayer or for Bible Study or for business or for tea and coffee should themselves always be geared for the outsider, but all that we do should be encouraging one another in the task of holding out the message of life and seeking to make disciples of all people. That's when we really start to share.

My brothers and sisters, we each have responsibilities to bear in the realm of faith – we need to keep on working with fear and trembling to complete our salvation; we need to be glad and rejoice with one another as we are being built together as living stones into a holy temple for the Lord; and we need to shine like stars lighting up the sky as we hold out the message of life. Let God be glorified among us; let love be grown among us; and let the message of life be shared with our community and beyond.