

**Sermon, St Andrew's, 18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity, 11<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

**(Phil.4:1-9, Matt.22:1-14)**

***Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, Rejoice!***

*May we write and read, think and be, speak and do, in the grace, mercy and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, in one Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Are you rejoicing? I confess there may not seem to be much of that about just now – whether you're gearing up, battenning down, slogging along or muddling in the middle, rejoicing *always* may feel particularly hard at present.

What a beautiful Epistle! Reading St Paul's letters in sequence, as our lectionary readings do, can throw up very mixed results in combination with our Gospel sequences – were you worried that this sermon was going to delve into some of the violent imagery in the Gospel reading, or the symbolism of the wedding garment?

Our Epistle is rich in language of love. It calls us onward to ideals of loyalty, joy, gentleness, peace, honour, justice, purity and excellence – strangely similar to my Cadets' values of respect, integrity, service and excellence. These ideals can seem a long way off at times, but St Paul tells us how to get there – by standing firm, being of the same mind as each other, by looking for the joy in each situation; and to give our worries to God; and to focus on, to think about, anything that is true, honourable... and so on, down the whole lovely list (St Paul does seem to like his lists!).

It is very easy at present to focus on all the opposites, to listen to news about whatever is dishonourable, unjust, impure, displeasing, contemptible, terrible... there's a lot of it about!

But St Paul calls on us to stick with it, to stand firm in God – I'm reminded of the Saviour (in St John's Gospel)'s beautiful invitation to "abide in me". Not "abide *with* me", but a deeper, indwelling gift and relationship with God – abide *in* Him. Don't *live* on Facebook, in the news etc.; but *in* God.

The Church at Philippi was clearly struggling (the rest of Paul's letter shows that), but amid it all, there was the flowering of such gifts and

grace. And they are called to be joyful, to be gentle, to nourish themselves in Spirit with all that is positive, to focus on the good; to cast all their cares on the Lord – and, in return, comes the fullness of the peace of God, His guarding of each of our hearts, whatever storms swirl in the outer world around each of us.

St Paul's offering, invitation and vision is not some idealistic retreat, but an eminently practical and attractive help of how to stand fast amid struggle. The final verse lies behind the last words of *Dewi Sant*, St David, to "keep on doing the little things".

Paul can occasionally be a bit tough to his readers! But here the language overflows with love – those whom he cares about are "loved and longed for"; his "joy and crown", "loyal"; "beloved". One can really "feel the love" in being addressed like this – and want to live up to it.

I will not neglect the Gospel reading in these words – but let us not be distracted by the violence that colours and characterises much of St Matthew's record of our Christ (this is the Gospel in which men looking impurely on a woman are commanded to pluck their eye out – there'd be a lot of one-eyed men in Newcastle on a Friday night!); let us focus on the great sweep of the wedding invitation, the call to prepare appropriately for our God. Christ calls us and invites us, and St Paul shows us the way.

I can say little better than the words of St Paul this morning. May his letter be to each of us, to our hearts; and may we receive it as such, and write it down there, treasure it there. The city of Philippi suffered in the Plague of Justinian around 550AD and was destroyed by earthquake in 620AD; is now just a village of 900 people; and the prayer-house where the Church met in Paul's day is, frankly, rather small; but the love of the letter goes on, through changing and challenging times, to Christians all over the world, all now wrestling with the same bug in very different ways; may the same Spirit of love, of joy, of gentleness, be ever with us all – and may the peace of God guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus. May your name be in the Book of Life,

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*

**AMEN.**

**Malcolm Toft**