

Four weeks with Paul in Philippi



Reading: Philippians 1:18 – 30

Date: September 20

Theme: 'I continue to rejoice'

Indecision is a terrible thing, expressed by the old song from Jimmy Durante, *Did you ever have the feeling?:*

It's tough to have the feeling that you wanted to go.
then to have the feeling that you wanted to stay.
Start to go, change your mind,
start to go again and change your mind again.

Or, you could consider Shakespeare's words in Hamlet;

To be or not to be – that is the question -
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
or to take up arms against a sea of troubles,
and by opposing end them?

We use words like 'torn' and 'in two minds' in trying to describe the battle of making a hard decision. Usually we consider the pros and the cons and come to a decision either based on choosing what we like or choosing against what we don't like. And that's how some people see this passage in Philippians as Paul reflects on whether he will die or whether he will continue in ministry. Indeed, when I was studying Paul at college, one of the set questions was to consider if Paul was contemplating suicide! The answer is no by the way. Isolating these verses from the main sweep of Paul's letter and not considering the setting and the time and culture is the problem. That's what leads to only seeing indecision or questions of suicide.

Consider instead that this passage begins, "I continue to rejoice", and ends with wishing to continue with the people in Philippi in their "progress and joy in faith". And, also consider that Paul is stuck in prison awaiting a possible death sentence. He is not choosing between life and death, because the choice is not his, he is reassuring his friends in Philippi that whatever happens is a source of joy. And, while being with Christ would be wonderful, serving Christ now is better. Before calling for them to live lives worthy of the Gospel, he is showing them what that looks like. Rejoice! Because living is Christ and dying is gain.

You will have seen the background material on Philippi in the order of service, and while we don't know a great deal about the church at Philippi that Paul was writing to, what we can find in Acts, and mentions in the letters to the Corinthians, and from this letter, we can guess that Philippi was Paul's favourite church. This is a letter of friendship. Written to reassure friends that he is doing alright and not to be worried with all the news they are hearing about his life and his imprisonment. He writes that, "what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the Gospel."

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This is a letter of encouragement. Written because he has also heard that there is some friction and troubles in the church. In the last chapter he urges the leaders of the church to “be of the same mind in the Lord.” This is a letter of reassurance. Written to people in a very Roman culture of honour and shame to reassure them that his imprisonment is not a cause for shame, rather they should look to imitate both himself and Christ in humble service. In the second chapter we see that wonderful recommendation, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.” And, in friendship and encouragement and reassurance, this is a letter that is light and bright and joyous. Versions of the word for joy – joy, joyous, rejoice – feature more than in the other letters of Paul. Only once do we see the grumpy Paul, in his warning about those who might try to get into the church and preach a different version of the faith. This is a letter from Paul the pastor to his church; a letter that is full of affection and sharing. Rejoice! Our citizenship is in heaven. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything but put everything in prayer and supplication to God.

I believe, of all the letters of Paul, this is the letter for us now. Pandemic, climate change, financial collapse, pollution, species loss, youth suicide, aged care failure; the list goes on if you set your mind on the worries of the world. Paul offers a different way, a letter from jail where he is facing death and saying, “I continue to rejoice!”. A letter that says, “live as citizens of heaven, in a way that best displays the Gospel of Christ.” He is not talking about citizenship in heaven as some sort of escape or lifeboat, where you forget the troubles of the world by living in the church. Living is Christ and dying again means living as Christ did.

In the midst of foreign military occupation, rampant corruption and endemic poverty, Jesus didn’t gather a group of people and set up a commune safe from the world, he engaged with the needs of the people around him, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, dining with the outcasts and treating enemies as people. And he did all of that without considering that it placed his life at risk from the people in power who liked the poor being poor, the sick being sick and the outcasts being unseen. And I am sure, given the crowds that followed him, Jesus wasn’t a sour, moody holy man, but a source of joy and life. And that is what Paul is offering the people at Philippi concerned that he has run into Roman authority and is facing death. Rejoice! Our lives are with Christ, and while following him and living the Gospel of reconciliation with God may bring hostility and suffering, our lives are with Christ, and death is gain. Stand firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the Gospel.

This is our letter of friendship and encouragement and reassurance, and I encourage you to read it all, not just the selections we will focus on in the coming weeks, and tick off all the times that Paul says ‘joy!’ In jail, rejoice! My captors are hearing the Gospel. Facing death, rejoice! Living is Christ and dying is gain. Hearing that people are preaching so that he will get in trouble, rejoice! The Gospel is being preached. This is not just Paul, the positive thinker. This is the Gospel; our lives are with Christ and that is a cause for rejoicing. There is no indecision here about whether it is better to be with Christ here and now and working for the Gospel or to be with Christ in glory. Whether we live or whether we die we are with Christ, so let’s do our best to live as people who are with Christ and displaying the gospel of God’s love in all that we do. And do it all in the joy of God’s love. Let’s be people who say, no matter what is happening in our lives, we continue to rejoice.

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