

Sermon for Proper 23A

Philippians 4:4-6

Today we hear part of a letter written by Paul while he was in prison.

What would it be like to sit in a prison cell and know one might be executed in few days' time? What frame of mind would one be in? Would one live in a state of depression, cursing others for one's situation, and complaining a lot? What would one write in a letter, or send in an email or text message to friends and family? The Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote letters to his members from his prison cell, until the Nazis hanged him about 9 days before the end of the War. He was only 39 years old.

St Paul writes from a gaol in Rome to the Christians who meet together at Philippi. It looks as though Paul could be executed any day now. His future is in the balance. I don't know what we might say in that situation, but here is what St Paul writes to his congregation about life:

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again. Rejoice."

"Don't worry about anything!"

"The peace of God will fill your hearts and minds."

We humans tend to blame others or our circumstances for our problems. St Paul reminds us that it is not the situation we are in that causes our misery, but rather how we handle the situation. I have met poor people, and I guess you have too, who are among the happiest people one could ever come across. And I have met both poor and wealthy people who are so mean and suspicious of everyone else they are always miserable.

Some people are incredibly resilient and take whatever life throws at them in their stride – whether it's disability, ill health, or loss. They can somehow maintain a positive outlook and be content despite everything. Their cheerfulness is contagious and they are a joy to be around. On the other hand, the magazines on the newsstands are full of celebrities who seem to have everything but happiness. Their relationships fail and they sink into depression and addiction.

The key to a happy life is not the situation one finds one's self in, but how we handle the situation. This does not mean we will always handle the situations perfectly in our own lives, or that we'll never go through times of bitter disappointment or depression. St Paul is writing precisely because he knows people go through bad experiences like this. He doesn't want those experiences to take control of our lives.

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice." St Paul knows there are times when one is brought low in life. It can be a different shattering event for different people. For one person, it could be the loss of one's home in a fire. For another it could be the end of a special relationship – maybe a marriage or friendship. Or it might come when one must sell one's family home and move into a unit. Or when death takes a loved one or when one is diagnosed with a terminal illness. Perhaps it might be the loss of a job and an inability to find another one. It might even be finding yourself in prison.

At times like these we can take stock – count up what we have left. What do we still have that is a treasure- something that makes life worth living? If one is to have a treasure it will need to come from outside of one's self.

St Paul assures his people the treasure has come from God, through Jesus Christ. We can always rejoice in the Lord, no matter how terrible our situation. In Jesus Christ you are in an ongoing relationship that will never end. Not even death can end it or separate us from the God who loves us more than anyone else. In Jesus we see how we are loved with the greatest love possible. *"God is love"*. [1 John 4].

The gifts that come from God - from outside ourselves - include the resurrection, and eternal life with the Father in the Father's home. Just like the prodigal son with a completely wasted life behind him, we are welcomed home by the Father. He never forgets us and the terrible position we might find ourselves in.

God will never kick us out onto the street. One is always accepted as precious because of what our brother Jesus did for us on the cross!

We can even look forward to meeting up with Jesus in the not too distant future: our brother who swapped places with us on the cross. The same Jesus who went into the grave so we could follow through too. There is so much we can look forward to! No matter how bad one's situation, one can always lift up one's head, look to the Father, and rejoice in the Lord. Next time you feel gloomy, ask yourself whether the reason for your misery is because you have forgotten to focus on Jesus Christ, your best friend?

We can rejoice over many different earthly things (like a big win in sport) but our rejoicing will only be temporary. Conversely, we can worry ourselves sick over many earthly things. St Paul knows that. He knows what we humans are like. In his letter he writes:

"Don't worry about anything; instead pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done."

Note that St Paul doesn't just tell us what not to do, he also gives us something positive to do: talk to God about everything. Hand it over to him. Let God do the worrying. He is big enough and he can handle anything!

God is the God of not only the past and the present but also the future. We are the ones who have problems with the future, but not God. It has been said that 90% of the things we worry about for the future never happen. The other 10% God can lead us through, so there's no point worrying about them either!

St Paul does give us something special to do. He asks us to thank God for all the help he has given us in the past. One's spiritual life can soon become empty if one does not stop and thank God for life itself, and all the delights and joys and pleasures in this world. A year 9 Scripture class was once asked to list some of the miracles in this world. One girl put up her hand and said: the whole universe is a miracle! What a wise statement! WE have a whole universe to rejoice in.

So in conclusion, St. Paul's letter reminds us that the Christian life is a preparation for the life to come. It is letting go of one's past, with thanks to God, and moving on to the future: a future of real living in our real home. No matter how bad our situation, we can always let God do the worrying!

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.