

Sermon

Downing Place URC

11th October 2020 (Pentecost 19)

Readings: Isaiah 25:1-9; Phil 4:1-9; Matt 22:1-14

‘Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say ‘Rejoice’. (Phil 4:4)

Imagine a church, a significant church, where two of the elders are deeply opposed to each other over a critical issue, perhaps how the building ought to be used or whether the mission priority should be the night-time economy or support for the environmental movement and those most afflicted by climate change in Africa and Asia. They are, in the nicest Christian way, at daggers drawn. They park their cars at opposite ends of the car park. At coffee after the service they gather with their particular friends and supporters, and slowly but surely the atmosphere in the church begins to get polluted with suspicion, envy, suppressed anger, and twisted vision. Hard to imagine I know, but try.

Then imagine the minister bringing his sermon to a climax on Sunday, ‘I urge Amanda and I urge Michael to be of the same mind for Christ’s sake. We’ve worked hard in this place. Don’t jeopardise our mission by this foolish quarrel. All of you, pray for them and bring them to their senses.’

How long, I wonder, before a polite letter arrives on the Moderator’s desk suggesting that it might be time for the minister to seek a

move? I always remember the dictum of the wise Anglican priest with whom I worked in my first pastorate, ‘Never scold the people’, and he was right. Confrontations like that belong in the private sphere, not the pulpit.

And yet that was exactly what Paul did in Philippians. We’ve not a clue who Euodia and Syntyche were, apart from co-workers with Paul and Clement during Paul’s ministry in Philippi. What we do know is that these two women have fallen out big time, because Paul pleads with his Philippian friends to ‘...be of the same mind in the Lord.’

Historically it is, of course, interesting that they are women. Macedonian women enjoyed considerably more freedom and responsibility than women did in other parts of Greece and the Roman empire. During his mission to Philippi Paul had converted a business woman called Lydia who was in the purple cloth trade, and she and her household were instrumental in the establishment of the church in Philippi.(Acts 16:11-15). Women were also amongst the first converts in Berea and Thessalonika (Acts 17:4,12). We’d don’t know if Lydia was still around when Paul wrote to the Philippians from prison, either in Ephesus in c. 55 or Rome c.60, but we do know that Euodia and Syntyche who had worked alongside Paul were now significant leaders there, perhaps of house churches or the equivalent of home groups.

Philippians was written because Paul wanted to thank the church there, which was dear to his heart, for the gift of money which they had sent to support him during his imprisonment.. They’d sent Epaphroditus with it, but he’d fallen seriously ill, and the Philippians must have wondered what had happened to their money.

But now, says Paul, praise God, he's recovered his health and I'm sending him back to you with this letter. (2:19-29) Paul's letters were meant to be read in church, so imagine the Philippians gathered together one Sunday morning. There'd been more, a challenging analysis of how Paul was working out the glorification of Christ in his imprisonment and suffering (1:15-27), a poetic exploration of the incarnation as self-emptying which touched the theological heavens (2:1-11), followed by an exhortation to regard everything as loss compared 'with the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord'

An admirable Sunday morning. The congregation had been uplifted, encouraged, given courage by Paul's example. Then the moment of utter consternation – Euodia and Syntyche, give up your damaging row because you're in danger of wrecking everything. Even now the discord makes us wince.

Then, without a blink of an eye, Paul changes tone yet again, 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.' (4:4).

'Let your gentleness be known'. The Greek word (*epieikeia*) is hard to translate – attempts from Biblical translators include 'patience', 'softness', 'the patient mind', 'modesty', 'forbearance', 'the forbearing spirit', 'consideration of others'. And commentators have added, fairness, reasonableness, willingness to see the point of view of others.

For the Greeks themselves it was 'justice and something better than justice', so it's the word used in the Greek version of the OT for God's kindness, and for the clemency, mercy and leniency of kings and judges. Think Jesus and the woman taken in adultery, 'Neither

do I condemn you'. Our relationships with others are regulated by the law, but those relationships can transcend the law. Wise and compassionate jurists understand that. And that is the kind of behaviour that Paul expects from Christians. They are people who know instinctively when it is right to move beyond justice, to temper judgement with mercy. Blessed the merciful, the pure in heart, the meek, the peacemakers, those who hunger and seek for righteousness said Jesus. Blessed those of you, Paul is saying, translating the gospel of Jesus into the language of the Graeco-Roman empire, who let your '*epieikeia*' be known, whatever the best translation may be.

Be like that, because God has been like that to you. Now that we truly know in our bones and in our hearts. We know precisely what we can be like. We are all Euodia and Syntyche, and worse. We know what the dark forces of our selves can unleash, the insecurity that breeds an obsession with status, the vulnerability that breeds fierce anger, the fear that makes us build walls to keep the other out. We know just how unloveable we can be. And yet, we are gathered together in virtual worship because we know that despite all that God has seen who we really are and loved us with unhesitating, unlimited love. The cross is the measure of the cost. Paul knew that too, and he knew that it meant the barriers were down and that the very best of human life was God's gift to all, which is why he tells the Philippians to cherish the honourable, the just, the pure, the pleasing, the commendable, the excellent. There's no Christian monopoly on those – indeed the Stoic philosophers in particular cherished them too. Being Christian is about enjoying the very best of God's gift of creation, be it art, music, literature, food, or

morality. 'Epieikeia', gentleness or whatever, was precisely one of those virtues.

But that embrace of the best of the pagan world was to be held in tension with the things, says Paul, '...that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me' – the language faintly echoing his account of the 'handing on' of Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians.

There is a specific Christian inheritance, of the gospel, of the fact that God has redeemed the world in Christ Jesus, that the final battle has been won and death and evil lie vanquished, though not yet fully routed, a reality re-enacted every Lord's Day when they gathered to break bread and drink wine. That is why Paul can exhort the Philippians to 'Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, 'Rejoice'.

Well, to our untutored ears that sounds like Pollyanna religion. 'God's in his heaven, all's right with the world.' In the midst of a pandemic, we don't feel like rejoicing in the Lord always, and frankly nor should we. So, we need to unpack what Paul is saying.

First of all, what is joy? Well, it's an emotion. What is an emotion? An emotion results when I construe reality in a certain way. If I construe reality to mean that it is biased in such a way that Michael will always do better than me, then I will be jealous or envious of Michael. If I construe reality to be stacked against me, then I will be angry. It's the same with joy. It's like a lover and a beloved discovering that their love for each other is actually mutual – that is their reality, and the result is joy. Christian joy, Paul says, happens when Christians construe reality as being God's redeemed creation, and realise that it actually is. That, I think, is why Christian joy is closely associated with worship and the eucharist. It is at those

moments that the true reality of God's relationship to the world and to us is made clear, and we are occasionally moved even to tears. It is because of that unchanging reality that Paul can write from prison in the midst of mounting adversities – 'Rejoice in the Lord always'. You might not always feel it, but the reality is constant.

Joy then, is not to be confused with happiness. Joy has a focus, and it is always open to critique. Christians are joyful when they see what ultimate reality looks like. But as we live between the cross and resurrection and the great day of the Lord which Isaiah foresaw when the Lord God will wipe away all tears, and the nations of the earth gather at God's great feast, we have to confront evil in many forms. Sickness, injustice, inequality, hatred, cruelty are crippling real, wreaking havoc in people's lives.

In the face of those realities we should feel not joy but righteous anger, crying with psalmist 'How long O Lord'? In days like ours we need to pause, and appreciate that, as Paul explained to the Romans, the Spirit is taking our groans and tears, and those of the Earth itself, and turning them to prayer for us because we can't even find the words.' (Rom 8:26-27).

So then, another Pauline tension – rejoice always, yet know the Spirit takes our sufferings and agonies and turns them into the stuff of salvation in ways we cannot begin to understand. There is a gritty Christian realism there which neither sells short the wonder of God's salvation, nor makes light of the dark side of human life. Paul knew that those realities are inseparably intertwined. It is precisely because he knew that the gospel infused ordinary life, that transcendentally beautiful theology and bickering church members are

one indivisible reality, that he pleaded with Euodia and Syntyche to make peace.

May we too make peace, and may God's blessing be evident amongst us today and everyday.

Amen