

Family introduction

Who has been watching the live footage of the Queen lying in state? It's strangely compelling and comforting and yet nothing much is happening and at the same time a LOT is happening.

All you can see is rows of people shuffling by the coffin, and knowing they have waited some 13 hours for this moment how do they use it? Some seem to walk by quickly perhaps conscious of those behind them who are waiting, some bow their head some make a sign of the cross. There is the sound of their feet shuffling by and then the wonderful ceremony of the changing of the guard performed perfectly with taps and slow marching.

So we are conscious mainly of silence, reverence, a feeling of history, of being part of something. The Bishop of Southwark yesterday called this a modern pilgrimage and people speaking about why they were there spoke almost in spiritual terms of I just had to come.

Something fantastic has occurred, a remarkable woman has died and the Nation, perhaps even the World has woken up to the fact that our adopted granny has died and as the song by Joni Mitchell went 'You don't know what you've got till its gone'...

The Queen has left a legacy that will start spiritual conversations that have not been had for a long time which reach into those questions of identity, who are we, what is life all about, do I matter and who will remember me when I am gone? Carpe Diem, seize the moment to have these conversations wherever you are this week and the passage we will study today will equip us to do just that and I hope to share what we need to know but spoiler alert, it's to do with being joyful in all circumstances, obedient to the Holy Spirit, messengers of Hope to a world that is desperately searching for the answers to life's big questions but coming up with the wrong answers, bold to follow through that conversation when we would rather stay silent and living a life with two realms in mind.

The 2012 Olympics were the Nation's last big time of Hope, when we invited the world to celebrate the inclusivity that has made us the Nation we are and it followed the London riots the year before, so feeling like a collective response of joy. I will let you into a secret... in the summer I had to go on a news fast, so unrelenting was the continual stream of depressive reports from the BBC and reporters always looking for the faults in people they interviewed and more examples of man's selfishness and greed wreaking havoc on one another. That was me saying, Stop! I want to get off, the world looks too bleak and depressing, how will it be for my children and grandchildren.

But I am grateful to you all, because you asked me to speak about Philippians today and in the reflections on this message of love hope and encouragement, I found the antidote to all of that again and I would like to share my excitement of doing that with you in the hope that the Holy Spirit can send you out fired up again with a renewed vigour to face the world and to share the good news that Jesus knew all things before they began and that like Paul, we will look not at our situation, but for what God is doing in that situation through us.

Isn't it lovely when you meet someone who is so in love with Jesus and is passionate and bold to share the good news, the gospel, with as many people as possible, wanting the best outcome for them, and knowing that comes from an intimate relationship with Jesus?

So this is a love letter from Paul to the believers in Philippi, the most intimate of his letters written from prison. Paul just cannot stop talking about Jesus! Do you remember when you first met Jesus, were we like that, speaking to everyone we met about the joy of knowing him and then maybe we found people were not very receptive, found us a little odd, and desperate to fit in we mentioned Jesus less, spoke up less fearing to offend? Isn't that what is happening to the Christian faith in the West, we are getting frightened to mention him?

My wife Maria is a Christian Counsellor and is attending a counselling course run this weekend by a Christian counsellor who she respects but was surprised to find that there were no references to Christianity in her material as it turns out the organiser was afraid of upsetting secular attendees. This is one of the tools the devil is using to stop the message of Jesus being preached and us giving the answers to the world's questions that they are seeking; and where better to get the answers to the meaning of life, than from the Creator of life, God!

The consequences of speaking out in the West are perhaps ridicule, accusations of being a killjoy or of being judgemental. In a large part of the world the consequences are much worse, imprisonment, torture, death, loss of job and housing, literally to follow Christ means giving everything; and yet isn't it in these parts of the world that Christianity is growing fastest, whilst in the West it is declining, what is going on?!

Well setting the scene for Paul, it was very dangerous to be preaching about Jesus in AD61 when Paul wrote this letter, not because of the Romans, they didn't think the charge that he came with was very serious, it would be years later that Rome persecuted Christians for this message. No it was the Jewish religious leaders who wanted Paul dead as they had Jesus. These were people who were not listening to the message and Jesus who knows all things before time had predicted that, remember the story of the landowner in Matthew 21 33-46, where the landowner sends his servants to collect the rent but the tenants react violently until the landowner sends his only son and the tenants kill him.

And Jesus also knew that people would stay silent but that the message of good news cannot be suppressed, as he says in Luke 19.40 'If they were silent, the very rocks would start to shout!'

Let's set in context the passage we are studying today. Paul is fired up about Jesus, literally everything he does is about finding ways to share the good news, the message of JOY! Has Paul always been such a bundle of joy, NO?! Something happened to transform him from one from Saul of Tarsus who was a Jewish zealot and hunted out Christians to have them killed to a man who would willingly die himself to spread that same message.

Paul tells us in chapter 3 v5 of Philippians what he used to be like because personal testimony is so powerful in sharing what Christ can do in your life to change your identity.

'I was circumcised when I was eight years old. I am a pure blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin-a real Hebrew if there was ever one ! I was a member of the Pharisees who

demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.

In Acts 9.1 Luke says that Saul was 'breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples'

I once thought that these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ. The Greek translation of the word garbage is human excrement, which makes the point more forcibly!

Now Paul says in Chapter 3 v1 'rejoice in the Lord. I never get tired of telling you these things, and I do it to safeguard your faith'

What happened to make this transformation, do you remember? It was an encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus whilst he was on his way to arrest Christians, Saul was blinded and Christ spoke to him and said Saul Saul why do you persecute me (Acts 9.4)? Jesus connected Saul with Ananias and Saul is healed by an obedient but nervous Christian!

Saul is now Paul and sets out on his second missionary journey and wants to visit two places but the Holy Spirit says no don't go there. We read in Acts 16 that he gets a vision of a man from Macedonia who says come and teach me about Jesus and so he sets off for Macedonia (modern day Greece) and arrives at Philippi where there is no synagogue because Jewish law says that you must have ten men to start a synagogue. So he goes down to the river and preaches to the women there and Lydia and her family ask to be baptised. Well not his normal ministry but it's a start.

Then as he goes about preaching a slave girl who had a spirit that enabled her to tell the future(and thus earning her owners money) keeps following him and shouting 'These men are servants of the most High God, and they have come to tell you how to be saved'

In verse 18 it says 'This went on day after day until Paul got so exasperated that he turned and said to the demon within her 'I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her' and instantly it left her. This was a messianic miracle by the way, only the Messiah could call out an evil spirit without asking it's name (which was the custom of the Jewish leaders), and this shows that Jesus had handed over the gifts to his followers as he had promised 'as I have done you shall do greater things than these...

This lands Paul in jail on false charges by the owners of the slave girl upset that they had lost their income. He and Timothy are severely beaten with rods and chained to the jail keeper. God sends an earthquake and the doors of the cells open and the chains fall off. In the darkness the prison guard thinks Paul and Timothy have escaped and is about to kill himself for failing in his duty when Paul says don't do that, w'ere still here! Paul has used the opportunity to make his second convert as the guard asks to be baptised. Paul's witness has told him about the character of Jesus and he wants some of that.

So now Paul is in Prison again. In fact the joke about Paul is that when he comes into a new town he asks someone 'can you tell me where the prison is as I like to know where I will be spending the night!'

I want to draw out two reasons why this context is important;

Firstly the church in Philippi has grown significantly in the ten years since Paul went there. This was the first church established in Europe and Paul is not writing in Ch1 v1 to Lydia and the prison guard

but to 'all God's holy people in Philippi who belong to Christ including the elders and deacons.'. He is clearly very excited about their progress and that such fruit has come from that journey.

Whilst Philippians is a book dripping with joy which I must speak about, the Holy Spirit wanted me to stop and sit on this fact when I asked what I should tell you today. Paul was obedient in hearing when the Holy Spirit blocked where he wanted to go and obedient in going where he was sent, but it must have seemed a bit hopeless, heck there wasn't even a synagogue in the town to go and preach in and his mission had once again ended up in him getting beaten up and making just a couple of converts. Do we feel that what we are doing is not working, feel reluctant to have that conversation in the café, the bus queue or the supermarket? I want to encourage you to be bold and like Paul did look for the opportunities that God is giving you in every circumstance.

When a young dairy farmer's son attended a revival meeting in 1934 and experienced Jesus God knew what that would lead to and Billy Graham preaching to an estimated 215 million people in 400 crusades in 185 countries... Do we trust and believe that God can use us to have a conversation that could lead to such an impact?

The second point of context is that God knows our physical needs. Romans didn't see the need to feed and clothe prisoners and so the Church in Philippi supports him financially for which he starts the letter expressing how grateful he is.

The word joy is mentioned continually in this letter. A missionary described meeting Jesus as like 'swallowing sunshine' and this is what leaps off the pages of this letter. But the joy that Paul describes and that Jesus offers as a GIFT is very different from happiness. The word happiness comes from Hap meaning chance. So you are happy if you get a salary increase but research shows that this effect dulls once the continual demands of the role kick in. We are happy when we meet our partner but as the relationship settles into a routine, people can lose that sense of excitement they first had and this can be the reason for people having affairs as they search for that buzz they had when they met their partner. We are happy when we get a new car, but reality kicks in when we have to make the payments and so too with a holiday where we can experience a high sense of happiness followed by a depression when we return to life at home. Lottery winners are happy when they get the cheque but following the stories of winners afterwards has shown that it often has a more destructive effect.

So the world is governed by a pursuit of happiness, it is even enshrined in the American constitution and surveys show that people are not finding it. Joy is being happy despite our circumstances, not governed by them.

Paul was in prison, chained to a Praetorian guard, one of Caesar's protection soldiers who came to have great power in the making and unmaking of Emperors; he is excited because he gets to preach to the guards 24-7 and he seizes the opportunity God has given him, we read in verse 12

'And I want you to know, my dear brothers and sisters, that everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News. For everyone here, including the whole Place Guard knows that I am in chains because of Christ. And because of my imprisonment, most of the believers here have gained confidence and boldly speak God's message without fear'.

It was important for Paul to explain this; remember the church in Philippi knew Paul was in prison AGAIN, but hadn't God always done a miracle to get him out, what was happening this time, had God forsaken Paul? No he explains, this time it is part of God's plan that he is pleased to follow, God is still working.

And whilst Paul is in Prison, we see in verse 15 that others are taking advantage of this and preaching out of jealousy and rivalry whilst others preach because they love Paul and know he has been appointed to spread the good news. Paul gives us an important message of unity for the church, that as long as Christ is being preached, let us not fall out with one another even if we think other's motives are not what we would like. So even in the early church the fault lines were there of division, but we must unite and celebrate what we agree about... that Jesus is sovereign, not what we disagree about in different styles of worship or prayer.

A Roman writer at the time of the early church was sent to spy on the Christians and reported that he was overwhelmed by their love for one another and newcomers which was sincere and expressed with physical support of each other. Remember what Christ said to Saul about his persecution of the early Church, why do you persecute ME?!

Paul also calls us to love one another in verse 9, but with knowledge and understanding, some translations say discernment. This is an important message for this time. We are to love absolutely and unconditionally but that is not a blanket anything goes in terms of our behaviour. In another letter he speaks to a church that is boastful of the fact that they are so loving that they fail to correct behaviour that is not in line with God's will. A parent will do anything for their child, even die for them, but does that mean that they should condone or accept anything the child does? no a parent's role is to give teach and guide their children and pass on wisdom.

You know the old joke about the child who says that when I was young my parents were quite naïve about things but now I am older I see that they have learnt a lot in that time...

So this is a challenge to us that Paul gives us, to boldly share truth and love in equal measure to a world that is governed by feelings and thinks showing love is accepting whatever behaviour people want to exhibit as long as it makes them feel good and doesn't break the law.

In verse 20 Paul talks about his predicament; which is better, to be released from prison and to continue to teach them and spread the gospel which will be good for them, or to die and be with Jesus, he sees both as good options.

The world is fearful at the moment and social media is accentuating that. We have emerged from two years of Covid into a period of high inflation, the prospect of an economic recession and a war in Europe that is costly in money and lives. Divorce rates are high and cynicism and negativity abounds. Democracy is under threat in the world and there is a global climate crisis. There is MUCH to be worried about.

There were lots of problems in AD61 as well so what does Paul tell us to do in verses 20-30, to be bold for Christ and to live as citizens of heaven. He says in verse 28 'Don't be intimidated in any way by your enemies. This will be a sign to them that they are going to be destroyed, but that you are going to be saved, even by God himself.... We are in this struggle together...'

So Paul urges us to accept suffering not as a punishment from God, but to see it as an opportunity to further the spreading of the Good News that has been provided by God. He recalls his time with the church in Philippi with joy even though he was beaten up and frustrated by the Jewish leaders and he describes his future situation with joy, even though the prospect might be death, which he can face because he knows with certainty that this involves meeting Jesus AGAIN. So joy is an attitude that we choose despite our circumstances. Research shows that just recalling three things to be grateful for each night improves our physical health so once again the medical world is catching up with biblical truths.

Tomorrow we will celebrate the life of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth 2nd and her life of service for 70 years. She was bold to always share her faith in her messages to the world, to explain that the values of Christianity, love, forgiveness, compassion, unity, service and an understanding of her identity in Christ had guided her throughout her life and enabled her to cope with the times of annus horribilis. This message was given to those of all faiths and none without offence because she simply explained the values of Jesus and how they impacted her life choices and that is so attractive.

Her legacy is that she is loved and respected throughout the world and we are now having spiritual discussions in the media that I have not seen for a long time and we should be bold to water the seed she has left.