

### Philippians 3 : 1-11 – 30.10.22

Chapter 3 and v1 provides the keynote to the whole passage – Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. It seems a bit early in this letter for Paul to be writing ‘Finally’ as we’re still only part way through. Do you think that possibly Paul lost his train of thought. Perhaps he had just written - *Finally, my brothers rejoice in the Lord* when the warder brought his breakfast and then, instead of rounding off the letter, a new train of thought has occurred to him and off he goes on a different tack.

But I don’t think we should subscribe to that explanation. This is an apostle of Jesus Christ writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. So he’s not going to be careless about his sequence of thought. Surely he would also take the trouble to reading it over before sending it off with Epaphroditus. No the letter holds together. You see this letter is a tremendous message of encouragement to the Philippians shot through repeatedly with the underlying joy that characterises the Christian life.

1:4 I always pray with joy because of your partnership with the gospel.

1:18 I rejoice and then I continue to rejoice.

1:25 your progress and joy in the faith.

2:2 make my joy complete.

2:17 I am glad and rejoice with all of you so you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

2:29 Welcome Epaphroditus in the Lord with great joy.

This theme continues in the letter and in 3:1 finally rejoice in the Lord. Then Paul goes on ‘It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again.’ What same things – why this joy in the Lord? Let’s emphasise it, Paul is not writing by a hotel swimming pool. He’s chained to a Roman guard in prison but there’s something about life in Jesus that brings about this unique combination of Christian suffering and joy.

In Hebrews 12:2 we read ‘*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God*’. We tend not to emphasise the joy that Jesus aimed for in enduring the cross but here it is and it’s the same recurring theme that the prisoner Paul can share with the persecuted pressurised Christians at Philippi. It’s no trouble for me to write the same things to you again. The overriding theme in the passage that we’re looking at today is the joy and confidence which is available to Christians but it can only be because of Jesus. The emphasis in v1 ‘rejoice in the Lord’ is really on the word Lord rather than upon the word rejoice. Better safe than sorry, says Paul, it’s only your confidence in Him that will keep you safe but, (you may well ask) safe against what ..... and then we find out when we come to v2. Watch out says Paul. Paul says to the church at Philippi ‘*Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh*. Who are these people?

That’s quite a strong phrase ‘you dogs’ and a phrase Paul would have used himself before he was converted and which the Jews used to describe the Gentiles. The word dog was a term of abuse and reserved by the Jews for the Gentiles. The question that they had to sort out very early in the Christian church at the Council of Jerusalem which we read about in Acts 15 was this. Can a Gentile who has just become a Christian enter into all the privileges of Jesus who is the fulfilment of all the Jewish covenants and promises. Is it right that this Gentile new believer should enter by a sort of

side gate, bypassing all the Jewish rights of initiation. Is the cross of Calvary enough for that Gentile or ought he, as some of those Jewish teachers were saying, undergo the initiation of circumcision because without that they really couldn't be part of the Jewish covenant and be saved and complete. But Paul won't have it. They'd sorted all this out in Acts 15. It was the Council of Jerusalem that ensured that the Christian family of faith was not going to become a small sect within a sea of Judaism. Christianity was going to burst beyond Judaism to an international community. Jews certainly would be included but also Arabs, Asians, Africans all nations. A confidence in Jesus would hold them all together because Jesus once crucified and now resurrected as universal saviour is big enough for the whole world.

For all his life Paul would be pursued by his former Jewish way of life. He would arrive in a new area and it wouldn't be long before the Judaising group would catch up with him, riots would break out, the word would get around and Paul would be arrested.

So Paul in v2 turns the term back on the original users. No, he's saying they're the dogs with their insistence on the physical requirements of circumcision. *'Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh.* His description of what to watch out for is heavily ironic. We've already looked at the phrase 'those dogs' which Paul turns around from the Gentiles and back onto the Jews who are insisting on ethnic purity for the people of God. Watch out for those men who do evil is Paul's contemptuous name for the 'good works' people. They call themselves the 'do gooders' but they're the ones who do evil. They are the ones who are insisting that only keeping the law will do as the standard for membership in God's people. Third, and most shocking he says watch out for those mutilators of the flesh. Paul is implying that by marking themselves out through circumcision they are really just like the sort of pagan cult that insists on making ritual incisions, gashes or wounds in one's body.

And in v3 Paul makes his counterclaim. We are the real believers. We who worship by the Spirit of God in spirit (as opposed to emphasising the flesh), who take our pride in Jesus (as opposed to taking pride in family descent) and who refuse to trust in flesh at all.

What does flesh mean? Knock off the h at the end of the word and say it backwards and it becomes self. A human based approach to God and to life. That's the flesh.

Once we move away from rejoicing and finding our confidence in Christ alone either for ourselves or as a church and once we find a new emphasis, a new insight and you can be quite sure that new insight will slowly take centre stage and define the fellowship and the cross is moved to the edge. That church will no longer be known as a church centred on Christ but it will become known as a Community Care Centre, or a Signs and Wonders Church or a media oriented church. Watch out says Paul. Rejoice and watch out. If our joy isn't scripturally based it will be short lived and won't last. If you try to improve on our confidence in Jesus, to enhance it, to add to it, then you are only expressing confidence in the flesh. Self-confidence will kill your joy in the Lord. Yes, yes we say – we know all this and we've heard it all before but Paul continually emphasises it throughout his letters because he knows that we ourselves are our biggest stumblingblock to being completely and utterly committed to Jesus. It goes against our very nature, the very people that we are and the world tells us we should strive to become.

Paul takes himself as the model in v 4-6. If anyone could have reason for a human based confidence it was me. He goes on in v5 if you think you can outdo me in an impressive line-up of contributions to a religious life then think again.

Paul says I had it all -  
circumcised on the 8<sup>th</sup> day,  
a true member of God's own people Israel,  
from the tribe of Benjamin which produced Israel's first king – and Paul's own namesake Saul,  
a Hebrew of Hebrews – a child of godly religious parents,  
in terms of the law a Pharisee who were top of the moral Jewish tree, actively taking sides and  
attacking followers of Jesus,  
and in regard to moral righteousness – faultless.

That is quite a profile. Not many could match such a profile. Well says Paul it's all flesh. It's all of self and self only. The life that is lived without the saving power of Jesus is all self, all flesh. So the danger facing those Philippian believers was that we can so quickly move away from the free grace of God. It happens so easily. **We** can be the worst offenders. I'm heading such a church group, I'm one of the church's insiders or do-gooders, and my church can't survive without me. Paul says it all counts as nothing. He says so in these next verses 7-11.

Tom Wright in his commentary on Philippians tells the story of the great 19<sup>th</sup> century Anglican theologian John Keble. As a young don in Oxford in the early years of the 19th century, he held at one stage the office of college bursar. Few clergy then or now, for that matter, were trained in the art of balancing columns of figures and in one particular year Keble's accounts were stubbornly out of balance by nearly 2000 pounds. Eventually the mystery was solved. Having written the date at the top of the page, he had added the number of the year – it must have been somewhere near 1820 – into one of the columns of figures.

There are many methods of creative accounting but normally balancing the books is a matter of putting together a certain number of items on the credit side (let's say money in) a large number of items on the debit side (money out) and calculating them to see how close they come and hopefully balance. That's the picture Paul is working with in verses 7 and 8 before he drops the metaphor and concentrates on the new ideas that have emerged from it.

Paul's accounts, though, balance in a very odd way. He has just declared that, in terms of his status as a member of God's people, Israel, he had nothing on the minus side at all. Everything looked good and was on the credit side. It's all on the plus side. However, what he does is take all the items that looked as if they formed a credit balance and places the whole lot on the other side of the page instead. They are now part of the debit column. What has caused Paul to destroy everything on the plus side of his accounts and listed in v 4-6? Paul has discovered something to put on the credit side in comparison with which everything else he can imagine can only be a debit. V7-8 *But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.* In fact they're only fit for the rubbish tip. He counts everything he is in the world's eyes and sees it as a minus compared to the sheer worth of what he's found in Jesus.

And for you and I? Who or whatever you are - none of it matters. It's all on the minus side of the balance sheet. Paul calls it all rubbish. Only Jesus counts on the plus side.

And if that leads to suffering then we need only look to Jesus who committed himself utterly to dying on the cross and that wasn't easy for him. We get a glimpse of the agony of making that decision in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is the level of commitment which we also should be making says Paul. As v10 and 11 indicate, the faith that reaches out and embraces Jesus as Messiah

embraces also the way of suffering and death which marked him out. If you want to get to the joy of resurrection, this is the only way to go.

There's nothing uncertain about the resurrection, says Paul, and here he's talking about his own resurrection. It's the intervening events that are uncertain and how it's reached. Paul, like us, doesn't know how he will reach the resurrection – it may be by dying in his own bed or by Roman execution but whatever the means, Paul has complete and utter confidence in Jesus. Whatever that means for us today – and for some it will mean literal and physical persecution, while for others it may be more hidden and secret – we should never forget that within all this the account still stays in credit. Better to have the Messiah, and to follow him through the cross to the resurrection, than to have anything and anyone else in the world.

What else have we mistakenly put on the credit side which we think will help us enter the kingdom more easily than our faith in Jesus alone. Are we prepared to be a living sacrifice, to deny ourselves and take up our cross. To be where God wants us. And if we're unsure, and let's face it, it's impossible on our own, remember God sent us the Holy Spirit to help us and He wants us to say we can't do this on our own. Once we decide to give up self, then the Holy Spirit will help us in our surrender and we can move to receiving with a fresh in-filling of the Holy Spirit.