

Philippians 1:3-6(7-8)9-11 - 23rd after Pentecost (23.10.2016)

The joy of living by God's grace!

³ Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. ⁴ Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, ⁵ for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now. ⁶ And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.

[⁷ So it is right that I should feel as I do about all of you, for you have a special place in my heart. You share with me the special favour of God, both in my imprisonment and in defending and confirming the truth of the Good News. ⁸ God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus.]

⁹ I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. ¹⁰ For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return. ¹¹ May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation – the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ – for this will bring much glory and praise to God. [NLT]

A quote by the German philosopher, Nietzsche, - who grew up as the son of a pastor, but later became a dedicated opponent of the church - went something like this: Christians need to appear 'more saved'. They ought to sing better songs, if I am to believe in their Redeemer."

While one may quibble with this point of view - and probably the answer of a philosopher of what exactly he meant would fill a number of books -, it is true that we, as members of the church, often do not radiate the joy of being saved. There may be any number of reasons for that - one of them being that so often we seem not to really know why we are here in church, or what our life as Christians is about any more. Do we not need to discover again -

The joy of living by God's grace!?

This joy filled the apostle when he remembered the congregation at Philippi. It seems that one of the things we can learn from the early church, is that our role is not to be a kill-joy in the society we live in. [Some people only know what the church is against - not what it stands for, because that is the only thing they ever hear about us!]

That does not mean simply going along with everything that happens around us- but it means that we have a better appreciation of what it means that we are members of the church of Christ.

Paul can give thanks, and pray for the church at Philippi with joy, **for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now.** The members of the church in Philippi - as with other churches of that time - were first generation Christians. They did not belong to the congregation because their parents had been members, and their grandparents before them. They could not look back on all their ancestors had done for their congregation.

But what they saw was what Christ had done for them. What they saw made such a deep impression on them, that they could not keep this news to themselves, and so they became Paul's **partners in spreading the Good News about Christ.** To this day it is an irrefutable fact that for a church to grow, it needs new members. Not simply because they add to the numbers through their presence, but because it is 'first generation' members who tend to bring others to church. New members come to the church because they have been convinced of the truth of their salvation. That is something we, who have been in the church for multiple generations have to rediscover. We are mostly quite comfortable with the church being the way it is. New people bring new expectations and have high hopes - which almost inevitably lead to changes from the way things have 'always been'. [Do I need to tell you that we are not always comfortable with that?!]

We know this, but we may need the reminder, that nobody is a member of the church of Christ simply because their ancestors were members of the church for multiple generations. We may be on the books of the church because of the fact that our parents belonged to the congregation - but that is not what made us members of the Church of Christ. We are members of the church for only one reason - and that is that through Christ we have been called and accepted by God.

So we have to move from being simply members on the books of a certain congregation, to realising that we are only members of the church because God

has called us. Being part of an institution is bound up by rules of membership. Being a member of the Church of Christ is based on a new relationship with God, and living with him as a part of our daily lives because we know of his love for us.

It is this realisation of being in a new relationship with God, which changes how we view our being part of this or any other congregation. The relationship with God is of a Father with his children - in effect it is always a 'first generation' relationship which is based on the Father, and all he does for us. That is a big change from the institutional thinking, which seems to be based on what we must do so that we belong.

We belong because of what God did through his Son - and which he continues to do for us. Paul says here, **I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.** It is God, who began the work in us - and he will continue working in us. It is by his grace that we were called - and it is his grace which carries us through life. Finally it is his grace which brings us to be the 'finished product' on the day of Christ's return visibly for all.

Of course this is not done apart from us. It is not like someone who has opened a bank account in our name, and continues to money into it for us, and then one day we get to have all that money. Rather it is a case of God working in us, through us and with us.

That is why Paul's prayer is **that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding.** ¹⁰ **For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return.**

Being a member of the church is not a matter of taking - that became clear already when Paul spoke of being a 'partner in spreading the Gospel message'. The way we partner in spreading the Gospel is not necessarily by what we say - the best sermon may be when our **love ... overflow(s) more and more.** We who belong together are not made to live isolated from one another. The various images we are given of our being part of the church speak of an interdependence on one another. Whether that is the image of the church as a body with its various

members which are all needed for the whole to function properly, or a building which needs the individual bricks to be in their place, we need one another - and we are to help with the gifts we have, which are to be for the benefit of the church as a whole.

Together with overflowing love, is that we **keep on growing in knowledge and understanding.** That means we have never reached the point where we know it all. Our **knowledge and understanding** are not some theoretical attainment. It is the knowing and understanding of a person with whom we live in a relationship that Paul is speaking of. Of course we need to know the facts about the other person, but more important for the relationship with God is that we live with him, so that the relationship is vibrant and alive with the expectation of what he gives us.

What is especially important is that we **understand what really matters, so that ... [we] may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return.** Understanding that life is about more than being a success in our studies or at our place of work - of course we should also strive for that. But that is not what really matters! What matters, is what God has made us to be - that we have been saved from the dark powers that seek to destroy us, and that we now may - in the power we have from God - **live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return.**

Our life as God's child is based on the fact of our salvation. And now Paul's prayer is: **May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation – the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ – for this will bring much glory and praise to God.**

Fruit is what we see when we look at a tree - it is visible for all, because that is the 'character' of the tree. Our new character is that we are recognised by the fruit of our having been saved.

Where we allow this new character which Christ has given us, to come to the fore, we can say to Nietzsche and all the other sceptics: It is not what we do, but what God has done, and continues to do in our lives, by which we have been saved. As God is part of who we are, we will be filled with the fruit of salvation - and will express a deep and lasting joy to the world we live in.