

In the Lord

Paul's letter to the Church in Philippi is, as we have learnt in recent weeks, one of his prison letters, written as it was from a prison cell, probably in the city of Ephesus, where Paul has been incarcerated for his fearless preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And as he writes, and as he well knows, there is a real chance that he will be tried and sentenced to death. The sword of execution hovers over him – will it fall or will he be spared, at least for now?

I wonder how you might feel in that situation. If I try to put myself in Paul's shoes I imagine that I would have been very frightened. I would not have been sleeping too well. Yet what strikes us in reading this letter is the extraordinary peace that Paul seems to possess. He is not a troubled man. Further on in this chapter we have read from Paul speaks of contentment: 'I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty...' In other words there is an extraordinary serenity and composure about Paul here, at a time when he might be forgiven for being anxious and afraid. And I want to probe this strange courage and calm that possesses Paul here by picking up on a couple of things that Paul says in this passage. As he draws this letter to the Philippians to a close he fires off quite a number of commands and instructions to the Philippians. At times they seem quite random and unconnected. But I want to pick up on a couple of things that express his extraordinary resilience.

Firstly, in the first verse of the chapter, Paul addresses the Philippians as his brothers and sisters whom he loves and longs for, and he tells them to 'stand firm', and I find myself struck by this. Paul, facing possible execution, tells the Philippians to stand firm. You might think it would be the other way around! Isn't he the one who needs encouragement to be strong? Well, maybe Paul's words demonstrate that he has himself found strength, that has himself found the resources to stand firm, even as he languishes in prison, possibly on death row. He knows what it is to stand firm, and so encourages others to do the same.

But then there is another striking phrase which comes in verse 4: 'rejoice in the Lord always', Paul says, and he goes on, 'Again, I will say, rejoice!' And similarly, you might think that he does not have much to be joyful about. Yet his letter to the Philippians resounds with joy: the word appears in some form 14 times in the letter.

What we have here, then, is a man, possibly experiencing severe conditions of discomfort and hunger in a dank prison cell and with a possible date with the executioner on his mind – and not only is he standing firm, and encouraging others to do so, but he's rejoicing! What is going on? How can he be so upbeat? Well, the answer comes in a small phrase that is repeated throughout these verses, and it's the phrase 'in the Lord'. So we note that in fact Paul does not just say to the Philippians, 'stand firm' – he says, 'stand firm in the Lord'. And he doesn't just tell the Philippians to rejoice, he tells them to rejoice 'in the Lord'. And it's only a matter of three words, but what a powerful three words they are and what a difference they make. The fact is that it is hard to stand firm and to encourage others to stand firm when your foundations are shaking, just as it's hard to rejoice and to encourage others to rejoice. But Paul is 'in the Lord'. And what does that mean? Well, we might explain it by saying that to all appearances Paul is in a prison cell. That is his location. Those are his surroundings. But for Paul all of that is framed by a wider context, for the ultimate truth of his life is not that he is 'in prison' but that 'he is in the Lord'. And there is something very deep and mysterious – indeed mystical – about this, that as Christians we somehow we live in Christ and he lives in us such that he is our true location, our true surroundings, our true context. The Lord is our habitat, the setting of our lives, and from there everything looks different - even the view from death row.

Two people come to mind, both of them inhabiting cells. The first is the German theologian and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was executed by the Nazis towards the end of the second World War. He was in Paul's situation, with the threat of execution hanging over him, and he wrote a poem called 'Who Am I?' In it he compares how he is viewed by others

with how he sees himself. Others see him as brave and resilient, bearing his circumstances courageously, but he sees himself otherwise: He writes,

Who am I? They often tell me
I would step from my cell's confinement
Calmly, cheerfully, firmly,
Like a squire from a country house.

Who am I? They often tell me
I would talk to my warders
Freely and friendly and clearly,
As though it were mine to command.

Who am I?...

But then he goes on, contrasting what he appears to others with what he knows of himself...

Restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage,
Struggling for breath, as though hands were
compressing my throat, yearning for colours, for flowers, for the voices of birds, thirsting
for words of kindness, for neighbourliness....

Weary and empty at praying...

Faint, and ready to say farewell to it all?

And he concludes in some desperation by asking which is really him.

But then come the final reassuring lines:

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.

Bonhoeffer's realises there that what matters is not what he is in the sight of others or what he is even in his own eyes – but what he is 'in the Lord'. 'Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine'.

The other person who comes to mind is the 14th century mystic and writer Julian on Norwich who spent a life of prayer and contemplation in a cell and who described her visions of God in her famous work, 'Revelations of Divine Love'. In that book she writes of the great reassurance God gave her that despite the sufferings of the present age 'All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.' She also noted, however, that God said to her "not 'Thou shalt not be tempested, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be dis-eased'; but he said, 'Thou shalt not be overcome'." Now, that is the other side of Paul's 'stand firm': the promise that 'in the Lord' whatever tempest or travail or disease may assail her, she will not be overcome. Nothing can ever finally defeat or triumph over her. So stand firm.

And this, surely, is what lies behind Paul's buoyant encouragement to 'rejoice in the Lord'. Joy, of course is not the same as happiness. It does not mean we go through life with grins on our faces. Joy, rather, is founded on the conviction that things that appear hopeless and lost in the world appear differently 'in the Lord'. The great theologian Karl Barth said of joy that it pivots round the word 'nevertheless'. 'Joy', he said, 'is a continuous, defiant nevertheless.' So for Paul in prison things might have looked hopeless. But 'nevertheless' things look different 'in the Lord'. The Gospel looks at a world running out of hope, a world of which we might be tempted to despair but says, 'nevertheless, in the Lord...' and thence comes joy.

We find that phrase, 'in the Lord' elsewhere in our passage. It appears that in the Church at Philippi there is conflict. Paul refers to two women, Euodia and Syntyche who are evidently at odds. We don't know why they are at odds, but one of the glories of these churches that were springing up in the ancient world was that they were wonderfully diverse: people from different backgrounds and different social status were being drawn together around Christ. But of course where there is diversity and difference there is also, all too often, division - and evidently that was the case in Philippi. And what is Paul's response? Well, Paul entreats them to see beyond their differences and their divisions and to be 'of the same mind - 'in the Lord''. And that is a lesson that

we can only wish that the Christian church had learnt through the centuries – and still today. Our setting ‘in the Lord’, is surely the key to our unity beyond difference.

We need, however, to extend this beyond the church, for it is not only the church that is conflicted. So note that after exhorting the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord always he says in verse 5, ‘let your gentleness be known to everyone’: gentleness is to be a feature of life in God’s realm. But where does gentleness figure in our cut-throat, competitive world? The Greek word here for gentleness has overtones of patience and forbearance, a willingness to give place to the other, even those with whom we disagree. And being gentle might easily appear to be in tension with standing firm. Standing firm, after all, suggests that we must take a stand on what we believe and what we cherish. Standing firm is a call to resist, as we must. But what does standing firm look like in our fractious and divided world, where people are increasingly strident and combative and aggressive in their convictions – think of much political and social discourse today? Think of Facebook and social media. How can standing firm be tempered with gentleness, forbearance, patience? We need to start viewing the world with fresh eyes, from a different perspective. We need to learn to view the world ‘in the Lord’. We need to start viewing the world and one another through the eyes of the one who said of himself, ‘Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.’

Let us learn, then, from this prisoner for Christ as he writes from his jail cell, threatened with death. Stand firm - in the Lord. Rejoice – in the Lord. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. And the God of peace will be with you: that peace that was so evident in Paul, despite his troubling circumstances. Amen.

Gracious and loving God,
 eternal and holy one,
 we come this morning with praise on our lips
 and with joy in our hearts:
 not because all is well,
 not because our lives or our world are
 as we would like them to be,
 but because we believe in you,
 and we believe that you are good, and loving,
 and that in your hands everything is safe.
 We praise you for the world you’ve made,
 we praise you for the blessings of life,
 and we praise you for commitment to us
 and solidarity with us through thick and thin.
 O God we confess to you our sins and wrongdoings;
 We confess the ways we have failed you and one another,
 and failed ourselves;
 Forgive us for our resistance to what is true,
 and honourable, to what is just and pure,
 and pleasing and commendable –
 all the things that enhance life.
 O Lord, have mercy upon us and forgive us.
 Raise us up to new lives;
 Help us to stand firm in your strength and against sin.
 And we pray all these things in Jesus’ name
 And in the words he taught us, saying....