



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 1st October 2006
by Mark Ashton

10p

Philippians chapter 1:1-11

A 2,000-year-old letter

Introduction: “The Epistle of Joy”

Today we are going to start to study a letter written the best part of 2,000 years ago. I wonder if your heart ever drops when you find yourself in a church service and you see what the sermon is going to be about? Or perhaps you see who the preacher is going to be? One student opened his order of service at the beginning of the service and let out a loud and audible groan. The middle-aged woman sitting next to him asked what the matter was? Without looking up from the service sheet he said, “It’s the preacher today. It’s Dr Russell. He’s my director of studies, and he’s the most boring old toad in the universe. None of us will get out of here alive. We will all die of boredom”. “Oh,” said the woman, “do you know who I am? Do you know my name?” The student looked at her and said, “No, I don’t.” She said, “I’m Mary Russell, his wife.” There was an awkward pause, and then the student said, “Do you know my name?” She said, “No, I’m afraid I don’t.” And the student said, “Alleluia!”

Well, whatever you think of the preacher, don’t let your heart drop too much at the prospect of studying this bit of the Bible, Philippians, because it is one of the happiest, most cheerful documents in the New Testament. And it gives us an insight into one of the most influential figures in human history: for here the apostle Paul is going to speak his mind and open his heart to you and me, his readers. Indeed in 1:21 he is going to tell us the secret of his life, as we will see next week. So let’s start with him—

1) The Writer – an extraordinary man in an extraordinary situation

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To

all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons (v 1). In the opening greeting he linked himself with Timothy, but from then on it is all in the first person singular: *I thank my God every time I remember you* (v 3). It comes straight from Paul’s own heart.

Now, we are very familiar with the cult of the celebrity in our day. Our media love to pry into the lives of the rich, the famous and the successful. Every antic of a Tom Cruise or a Robbie Williams or a Madonna or a Wayne Rooney or an Orlando Bloom is noted and photographed and paraded. But with our modern celebrities we know all about their exteriors: their appearances, their activities, their lifestyles, their romances. But we know very little indeed about their interiors, their thinking, what makes them tick.

But, with Paul, it is exactly the opposite. We know practically nothing for certain about his appearance, we know absolutely nothing about his taste in clothes, and his fashion sense. But we can get right inside his heart and his mind: *I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus* (vv 3-8).

In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy (v 4) and joy is going to be a hallmark of

this letter. It is not an Oklahoma sort of joy—I don't know if you remember Curly singing, "Oh, what a beautiful morning! Oh, what a beautiful day! I've got a wonderful feeling—everything's going my way!"? (No, you don't remember that? Well, that was one for the over 50s).

Things certainly were not going Paul's way. For a start he was in prison, perhaps under house arrest in Rome. What can it have been like for this busy activist, who was spreading the news about Jesus Christ all over the Roman world, to be cooped up, unable to move, probably shackled to a Roman soldier beside him? Do we imagine him pawing the ground like an impatient horse, pacing up and down like a caged lion, or beating his wings against the bars like an imprisoned eagle? Well, we would be quite wrong, if we do. Because Paul was content, indeed he rejoiced (verse 18), at this situation.

It seems Paul was more concerned about what happened to the Christian believers in Philippi than he was about what happened to himself: ***It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus*** (vv 7-8).

Paul's emotional world was not limited by the walls of his prison. His heart reached out across the Adriatic Sea to Philippi, and to other fellowships in Greece and Asia Minor, and even back in Palestine. What happened there to them mattered to him; so that what was happening to him in Rome no longer dictated his emotional mood.

I wonder if you have begun to experience this widening of the human heart? So it is no longer our own concerns that matter most to us. It has been said that a person wrapped up in him or herself makes a very small parcel; but there are experiences that begin to take us outside ourselves. True lovers know it with one other person. Mothers know it with their children. The Christian believer begins to know it with all who share his or her faith in Jesus.

[Illustration 1] There are some of us who just see 'Me' in this world, when it comes to happiness.



Illustration 1

But others are learning to see 'You', which is a lighter and a more cheerful joy.

But what had caused this heart-widening in Paul? It was not his own moral achievement, that he had taught himself to become a very other-people-orientated person. It was because of a shared experience of God's grace: ***It is right for me to***

feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me (v 7). God's grace had broken into Paul's life, even when he was on the road heading to Damascus to kill Christians.

And that grace now bound Paul to everyone else whom it had touched. He now knew his life was part of something far greater. What happened to him was no longer the beginning and the end of everything. He had become a part of God's purpose here on this earth. We'll return to this in a moment, but let's now consider—

2) The Readers

The saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi as Paul addresses them in verse 1. What Paul meant by that word *saints* is unpacked in verse 6: ***being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus***. That is pretty much a definition of what a Christian is according to the New Testament—someone in whom God has begun a work that He will carry on to completion at the day of Christ.

a) Their shared experience

That shared experience is what binds believers to one another. It is not our decision to make the same commitment to Christianity. It is our shared sense that God has dealt with us, and is dealing with us.

Do you have that sense? Or is your Christian faith a matter of human decision and human effort? Is it a natural thing, or a supernatural thing?

Paul is telling us that the Christian believer knows that he or she has been supernaturally touched by

God. And, however much we may fail Him day-by-day in our lives, we know He never gives up on us. Indeed, of every single thing that happens to the believer, however tiresome, however painful, however irksome, however dreadful, the believer can say, “Without this, I would not be ready for the day of Christ; I would not be complete. And so I can bear it, however painful it may be, because God is using it to complete His good work in my life, to get me ready for *the day of Christ Jesus*”.

b) Their shared task

And the Philippian Christians’ shared experience of God, beginning that good work in their lives, had also provided them with a shared task, what Paul called a *partnership in the gospel: because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now* (v 5).

Like Paul, they knew they were part of something bigger. This is not a great illustration (and it may not appeal to you very much), but why is a housewife distressed to see an ant on one of the worktops in her kitchen? I suggest it is not the bacteria on its six little feet. It is the thought that one ant is always part of something bigger. She knows that there is a whole ants’ nest out there on the patio, now planning to infiltrate her kitchen. Now, while that is a distressing thought to the housewife, it might be quite an encouraging thought to the ant (I told you that it is not a very helpful illustration). The ant might take courage from the fact that he is part of something much bigger. There is a whole nest out there with plans now for this kitchen worktop. (We won’t push that illustration any further!)

For Paul, the gospel is God’s offer to this world (to call men and women back into relationship with the God Who made them, by the good news of the death of His son on the cross in our place for our sins). Paul knew that he, and all other believers, are therefore enlisted in God’s work for this world. So what happened to him personally was only one tiny part of the jigsaw—like that one little ant on the worktop.

Christians have become part of something far bigger than themselves. Perhaps there is someone here this morning who has just come up to Cambridge for the first time to study and who has already been asking him or herself, “Why have I come here? Why did I work so desperately hard to get those A levels in order to be here? What was it

all for?” Well, Paul would answer you, if you are a Christian, by saying, “you are here to be a partner in the gospel, to fulfil (not your own petty ambitions), but God’s purpose for this world”.

And that is true for every one of us in this building now: if we are believers we are here on this earth for a task—God’s task for us—to call the human race back to Himself. Is that a task big enough to give your life dignity and meaning? To give you a reason for doing whatever it is you are doing at the moment? I think so.

c) Their shared purpose

It is a wide purpose. Look at how Paul prays for the Philippians in verses 9-11: *And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God*. His prayer sets out a shared purpose for all believers. It is a process: Love → knowledge → insight → discernment → purity → blamelessness. Notice that love is a way in to knowledge. How much easier it is to study an academic subject when we start to love it! I have to say it only really happened to me once in my academic life, but it was great when it happened.

But this is not the sort of knowledge we are taught at college. We don’t learn at university how to keep our marriages together, or how to bring up our children, how not to lie and deceive, how to deal with my own pride, how to grow in holiness and love—not even how to know why we are here on earth. There is no faculty offering a course in any of those in all the universities of this country or this world. But there is a God Who made human beings and Whose purpose for them is that they do just that; that we may be *filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God* (v 11).

3) The Subject Matter

That brings us to our last point, because the subject matter of the letter is Jesus Christ. There are over 60 references to Him in this short letter. He is always there. Mentioned twice in verse 1 of our passage. Once in verses 2,6,8,10,11.

If we were just to look at Paul as we've been looking, and at these believers in Philippi, and the relationship between them, we could make no sense of this passage...because behind them stands another figure: A gigantic figure, who looms over history and over the human race.



Illustration 2

Forgive me another illustration from the insect world, which may be a little distasteful to some [Illustration 2]. But we're all familiar, I suspect, at least with pictures of a swarm of bees, even

if we've never encountered one in real life. It may look a mess. But it has a reason. At the very centre we know there is a queen bee. The bee-keeper knows that it centres round that queen. And if he can find her, he can take the swarm and put it in the hive where he wants it to be.

Now, the Christian church, even this gathering this morning in this building now, is not a random gathering. I don't know if it felt like that this morning? Maybe you came along out of habit or you came along because some friend was bothering you to come, or you came along because of some of the other people here, or maybe you came out of curiosity. And you looked round and you said, "Well, it certainly looks like a rag-taggle gathering to me, Mark, as I look around at the moment? It looks like any old gathering of people that might be here."

But actually it has a centre. You yourself may not know that centre yet. But this gathering makes no sense whatsoever if there isn't, as it were, a queen bee at the centre of the swarm, if Jesus Christ is not present through His Spirit in our hearts now.

And as I draw this sermon to an end I want to ask you, have you discovered the centre? Don't get put off by the swarm. Look for the queen! Find the centre! We're not a debating society. You haven't gathered to listen to me. You haven't gathered to sing those songs. We haven't gathered to say a few prayers. We have gathered because of one man, the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you haven't yet met Him, this gathering and any gathering like it will always be a waste of time. But, if you have, you will know why you have

come to church. I say this with a certain feeling because thirty years ago I started my first course at college and I liked the Christians around me. I thought they were stupid. I thought they were misguided, misled. They were very poor arguers. But I did like them. I didn't much care for their gatherings, because I was more conscious when I was at the gathering than when I was with them individually that there was something here that I could not put my finger on. And gradually, over my first term and a few weeks of my second, that Figure which was at the very centre stepped out of the shadows and made Himself real for me.

I want to encourage you from the bottom of my heart to be open to that happening to you.

Equally, if you do know what I am talking about and He is a reality for you this morning, I want to encourage you very much that, whenever you gather with other Christians, find the centre. Be there for Jesus and not for anything else. Not that good-looking girl the other side. Not that nice bloke whose eye you are hoping to catch. Not because you like the singing and it's fun to do it all together, and there is such a feeling of friendship.

I experienced with Christians a friendship that you don't see on 'Friends', or in one of those films like 'Four Weddings and a Funeral'. Not that sort of friendship which we know so well from the media. But something that was different, something that was supernatural, something that told me there was Someone I had not yet met in my life. And I want to encourage all of us to centre our lives this week on Him. Every time we meet with other Christians, let Him be at the centre. Every time we are with non-Christians, let's bring Him with us. Let's hold His hand as we walk through this coming week.

Let's make Him the reality at the centre of this gathering and of every gathering that you and I are a part of. And, only in that way will we understand Paul, what made him tick and the relationship that he had with these Philippian believers 2,000 years ago that we've been studying together this morning.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)