



The Round Church at  
**St Andrew the Great**  
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> October 2006  
by Mark Ashton

10p

Philippians 1:27-30

**A Fight on our Hands**

If you have been with us on the last couple of Sundays, you will already have noticed what a cheerful, personal, intimate letter this is from Paul to the Philippian Christians. Hard, I think, to make boring. And I hope I haven't been guilty of that. There was one Anglican vicar who was speaking through an interpreter in India and he began his sermon by saying, "The beatific familiarity of this theologically intriguing passage set in our beloved lectionary for the Sunday called Quinquagesima should not blind us to its dominical profundities". There was a pause while the interpreter scratched his head, and then he said in Hindi, "So far our speaker hasn't said anything worthwhile at all. When he does I'll let you know."

So far in this letter Paul has thanked God for these believers in Philippi, he's prayed for them, he's told them of his current circumstances, and he has opened his heart to them and his future hopes (*For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain* [v 21]).

And now we reach his first instruction in the letter: *Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ* (v 27a). In fact, in the original Greek this whole last paragraph of the chapter is a single sentence; and its main verb is that command right at the start: *conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ*. That is what Paul had written to these believers in Philippi to do: to *conduct* [themselves] *in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ*. We have much to learn from how Paul puts that—

**1) The Gift that changes your life** v 27

Have you ever been given a gift that you realise looking back on it changed your life? Something that, once it became yours, changed everything? Thinking about it, I wasn't sure that I ever had actually. But I guess my marriage would have been a bit like that. It came as an unexpected gift, when

Fiona came into my life 30 years ago. And, when I gratefully accepted that gift, everything began to change...and has gone on changing ever since. We may have been married 28 years now, but every day my relationship to Fiona changes me.

I saw a cartoon a couple of weeks ago of an older husband saying to his wife, "After all these years you're still a mystery to me, Martha". And the wife, somewhat tight-lipped, is replying, "The name's Winifred". Marriage is a gift, that goes on and on changing and changing us. And the gospel is like that. We hear about Jesus, about an offer He makes to us. We respond to that spoken offer, and then we find we have received something that is far more than just words: a Person has stepped into our lives, a Person Who changes everything. That is why Paul wrote: *Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ* (v 27a).

That gospel is not just a message. For those who receive it, it becomes a personal relationship with God.

Paul used a word which means to conduct oneself as a citizen/to perform one's duties as a citizen/to exercise one's citizenship. Philippi was a Roman colony and its inhabitants were very conscious that they were citizens of Rome c. 600 miles away. They belonged to Rome. But the believers there were citizens of heaven—that's what Paul is going to tell them at 3:20: *our citizenship is in heaven*.

Perhaps there is someone here today who is applying, or has applied, for citizenship of some country. It can matter a great deal at times in life what country you belong to. Well, Christians belong to heaven. There isn't anything further to apply for. We already have citizenship. But we need to act that way. *Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ* (v 27a).

Do we, if we are believers? Did you, this last week, conduct yourself as a citizen of heaven? You and I will have looked very different from everybody around us if we did, other than the other believers. Do we act as though we belonged (not to Cambridge, or London, or Oxford (heaven forbid!), or New York, or Chicago, or Lagos, or Singapore, or Sydney, or wherever else it might be in the world), but to heaven? Are we developing the national characteristics? Are we distinct?

What will it mean? Well, Paul goes on to explain—

## 2) Standing Firm and Contending vv 27-28

*Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you* (vv 27-28a). Conduct, which is worthy of the gospel, will be conduct that promotes the gospel. And that will mean contending for the gospel.

This is changed behaviour and clear witness (speaking). That is the nature of the relationship the gospel gives us with God. In business you can have a ‘sleeping partner’, someone who puts some money into a firm, but has nothing else to do with running it. But there are no ‘sleeping partners’ in our relationship with God. If God is going to play His part in changing our lives, then we have to let it be known that He is at work in us.

And, as we do so, we will be disliked: *stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you* (vv 27c-28a). Opponents will come with the territory. I think it was HG Wells who wrote the electrifying short story called ‘The Country of the Blind’: A man has a huge fall while mountain-climbing and his fall takes him into a valley populated entirely by blind people, who have learnt how to live quite successfully without sight and indeed who no longer believe that there is such a thing as sight. As he recovers from his fall, the sighted man does not fit in, with his claims to a different and a better way of knowing things. And, so after a careful examination of him the blind decide what they will have to do to help him to fit in and to become normal: they will need to gouge out his eyes.

It is a brilliant parable of how the unbelieving world responds to the Christian. The claim to know God is an enormous irritant to those who do not know Him,

And they know all too well how to frighten believers into silence, with the extraordinary pressures we human beings can bring to bear on one another, to enforce conformity to the accepted norms of belief and behaviour: *without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you* (v 28a).

And notice this is corporate. We don’t stand alone. We stand together. Those ‘yous’ in verse 27 and 28 are plural: *you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you* (vv 27b-28a). ‘*contending as one man*’ is a single Greek word meaning to struggle side by side with someone, competing or striving together for the faith of the gospel. In fact, there may be a sense here in Paul’s mind that the gospel itself is a player. We do not so much contend for the gospel, as we contend with the gospel.

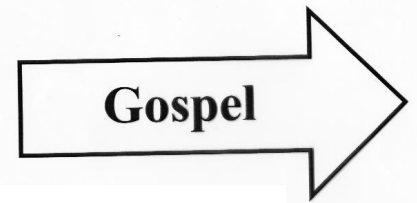


Illustration 1

Let’s resort to a diagram [Illustration 1]. The gospel is God’s great purpose for this world: that men and women [Illustration 2] should come to know the God who made them through the work of His Son who saved them. When Paul invites us to contend side by side, it is to bring our

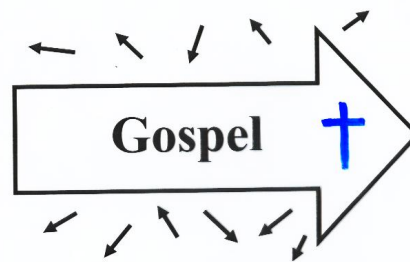


Illustration 2

lives in line with the gospel [Illustration 3], to align ourselves with God’s purpose for the world. No wonder I do not need to be afraid! What God plans to do with the world is what I’m

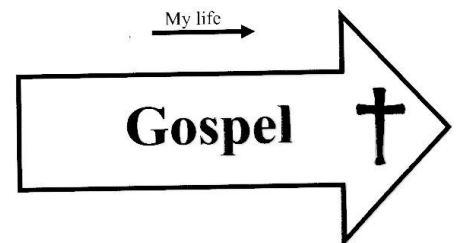


Illustration 3

giving my life to, if I am believer. And so I don’t have to win. God will do that. I just have to contend. I just have to stand firm for what I believe in.

Think of the enormous power of passive resistance in some of the political struggles of our own day! Fiona and I are just watching David Attenborough’s great, old film of “Ghandi”—you’ve never seen it? Oh, you really should! It depicts so clearly that when a cause

is right, you don't have to win: you just have to stand. What a contrast with the violence of so many wrong political stances!

(I am not saying that passive resistance is self-evidently always for a right cause. (You may be able to think of a wrong one). But I am saying that in a right cause passive resistance has great power, because it is a gospel way of doing things).

It is in line with the will of God for this world of ours. *Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God* (vv 27-28). Note that last sentence at the end of verse 28.

### 3) The Sign of Destruction and Salvation v 28

*This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God* (v 28b).

I know this from my own experience because it was the willingness of my own undergraduate contemporaries to stand on the simple truths of the gospel, in spite of the intellectual scorn which I, among others, poured out on them, that eventually convinced me that I was heading for destruction: *a sign to them that they will be destroyed*.

Those friends went on maintaining that there was a God and that it was only possible to know Him through Jesus, and that anyone who did not come to know Him that way would spend eternity without Him. They would not budge on that objectionable (and, to my mind at the time, intellectually indefensible) truth of heaven and hell: *This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God* (v 28b).

You see, no one who stands on such truths is doing it for fun. The gospel is not a human invention. No one thought it up as a well-reasoned, intellectually appealing human argument. You are never going to defend the gospel unless you have been saved by the gospel. No one in their right mind would stand for those truths, unless...unless it was through them that they had been saved by God. It is the fact that we have been saved by God through the gospel, which convinces us that the gospel derives from an intellect greater than the human intellect, and therefore it does not stand or fall by the verdict of the human intellect.

We stand before a greater Judge than our contemporaries, the human race.

When things were going badly for Christians in the fourth century under the reign of the Emperor Julian who was known as Julian the apostate, there was one pagan scoffer who mockingly asked a Christian, "So what's your carpenter up to now?" and the Christian replied, "Making a coffin for your Emperor!"

We stand before the eternal God, the God beyond life and death, not public opinion: *Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God* (vv 27-28). A sign of destruction and salvation from God. And all of this is God's gift.

### 4) The Gift of Belief and Suffering vv 29-30

*For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have* (vv 29-30).

*For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him* (v 29a). Faith in Jesus is a gift. We didn't earn it; we didn't deserve it; we didn't discover it by our own intellectual brilliance and spiritual vivacity; we didn't happen upon it by chance. It is given to us. If you are a believer this morning you will know that. If you are not a believer you will be puzzled by that. It's granted to us. Our faith is, as we saw at the beginning, the gift that changes everything.

But it also comes with pain. *For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have* (vv 29-30). What was the struggle that Paul had? Certainly the Philippians, if you read the story in Acts, had seen Paul beaten and imprisoned, and perhaps the same had happened to some of them. He was now in prison in Rome. But maybe Paul was writing a little more generally here—particularly since one suspects that not every single Philippian believer would have gone through exactly the same as Paul in terms of beating and imprisonment. I think we need to look a little more generally at this.

You see, Paul stood four-square on the word of God, and wherever he went he suffered for it. And in our own day Paul's teaching still faces the same hostility: whether it is to do with heaven and hell; or Jesus as the only way to know God; or salvation by free grace and not by religion or good works; or homosexuality; or gender roles; or sexual purity; or a self-sacrificial lifestyle; or shunning contemporary idolatries (like the career, physical health, education).

If you and I stand up for the same issues that Paul stood for, then we will know the same struggle that he had. It still goes on today. Align yourself with Paul, align yourself with the word of God, and you will know exactly the struggle he is talking about. The religious will hate us for proclaiming free grace (that we can't be saved by religion); the liberals will hate us for proclaiming judgement and hell; other religions will hate us for saying there is only one way to know God through his Son Jesus; the culture will hate us for standing against it on issues of sexuality and gender and health and lifestyle and idolatry.

And so what are we to do? What are you and I to do if we are believers today? Do we bite back? Do we strike back, intellectually, or in some other way? No. Do we expect political or legislative triumphs on the floor of the House of Commons? No. Do we look forward to eventual vindication one day? No—not during this life at least.

No, like Paul we proclaim Jesus, and we get defeated (we suffer), and we go on proclaiming Jesus. That is the way we conduct ourselves in *a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ* (v 27b).

Do you remember 'Gladiator'? It is a film that I hope at least that more of you will remember than 'Ghandi'. Maximus and his gladiator companions were not supposed to win in the arena, were they? They were there to be a spectacle and to be killed, whether it was by beasts or by other gladiators.

Well, you may not like the analogy, but in a sense we Christians are a bit like that: we're not put into the arena to win, at least not by human strength and in human ways, in a way that the world will say, 'Woah, you Christians, you're terrific'. The world is never going to say that of you and me, if we are faithful to the gospel. Gospel work has to be done in a gospel way. And the gospel has a Saviour on a cross at its heart (as Paul is going to remind us in the next few verses as we go on through Philippians).

Maybe our diagram should not be like the one we had [Illustration 3], so much as like this [Illustration 4]. The Christian life is cross-shaped. The gospel draws me into the purposes of God and sets its stamp on the whole of my life.

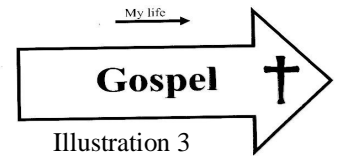


Illustration 3

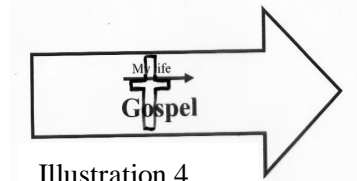


Illustration 4

The gospel is the most powerful thing this world has ever seen. The only way that we can be in touch with that power is if we let it conform our lives to that same pattern.

Brothers and sisters, are we up for this? Non-believing friend here this morning, what do you make of that?

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