

Sermon - rejoicing in suffering from persecution

Based on John 9.1-3, and Philippians 1 (NRSV)

A reminder of the Gospel story

- The short Gospel passage is the start of a longer one we had on the 22nd March this year - the last service for which the congregation was physically present here before the lock-down.
- I preached then how that story might be seen as a potent reassurance from God for the whole of our lock-down experience.
- Jesus had enabled the man born blind to see by putting mud packs on his eyes and telling him to wash in the pool of Siloam.
- And when he did so, he could see for the first time, but had obviously not seen Jesus and could not identify Jesus by sight.
- Instead of rejoicing and praising God for the healing, everyone questioned the man, about his identity, about Jesus' identity, about whether he had been healed or not, and questioned both his and Jesus' integrity.
- Eventually he was expelled both from being among the worshipping community, and from the synagogue - the place of worship.
- I suggested that we could identify in the same way with him, and that we could look to having the same subsequent experience as that man.
- Because, once he was no longer able to worship with his community and in the sacred space, he finally got to see Jesus, and was able to enter into true worship.
- And all of this is introduced by the words of Jesus that we heard just now: *'he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.'* (John 9.3)

Segue to Philippians

- This serves as a context for Paul writing to the Philippians about how God was using Paul's imprisonment to proclaim the good news of the Gospel.
- In his letter to the Philippians, Paul writes to the church community that appears to be his favourite.
- And so, as we work through the four chapters which this letter is divided into today and over the next three Sundays, we can expect to see mainly words of encouragement and thanksgiving, though he does also specifically encourage believers to be united in their living out of the Gospel message.

References to Philippi from Acts

- To start with, let us look at the book of the Acts of the Apostles, where Paul first visits the city of Philippi on his second missionary journey in the year 50 AD.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony.

We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.

A certain woman named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth.

The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.

When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, 'If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.'

And she prevailed upon us. (Acts 16.11-15)

Sermon - rejoicing in suffering from persecution

- And then on his third missionary journey around about seven years later, we read of two additional visits to the church at Philippi:

After encouraging [the disciples at Ephesus] and saying farewell, he left for Macedonia.

When he had gone through those regions (which included Philippi) and had given the believers much encouragement, he came to Greece, where he stayed for three months.

He ... decided to return through Macedonia.

... we sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and in five days we joined [the others] in Troas, where we stayed for seven days. (Acts 20.1-6)

Compilation of the published letter

- Now I am going to look at the editorial composition of the letter.
- Of course we assume that it is one letter, that Paul sat down and wrote, and that he started at the beginning of what we have printed in our Bibles, and wrote it all the way through to the end of what we see printed.
- However, there has been a fair amount of research from theologians thinking outside the box.
- There is now a strong argument for thinking that what we regard as one document, is actually some substantial pieces from two or perhaps three different letters.
- This helps to explain why in the middle of the letter Paul says: *Finally, my sisters and brothers ... (Philippians 3.1)* - and then goes on with the second half of the letter!
- Also, Paul says as he begins what might well be from another letter: *To write to you what I have already written before is no trouble to me ... (Philippians 3.2 NJB)*
- Here Paul is referring to at least one other letter to the church in Philippi.
- It might seem strange to us when we are very careful with keeping documents intact and are mindful of copyright rules and so on, that what we assume to be *the* letter to the Philippians might actually be an edited document composed of pieces of letters.
- We need to be mindful that the early churches were focused on keeping those writings that were particularly useful to them.
- And so it's possible that some of the Philippian elders pulled what they thought were the most encouraging bits from various of Paul's letters to them, and compiled these into one document for sharing and for teaching from.
- This had taken place by the end of the first century, that is, within forty years of Paul having written the original letters.
- At any rate, it was in this form that it eventually found its way into the canon of the New Testament, when it was eventually ratified by synods and councils in the second half of the 4th century - the late 300's AD.
- What we might also find a bit startling is that the first two chapters of this document come from a second letter, while the bit from the first letter is found in chapter 4.
- Researchers think a third letter is used for chapter 3.
- We do not need to be overly concerned by this - it just helps to explain some of the references that Paul makes that otherwise seem to be out of order.

Paul writes from prison

- The most significant aspect of the context of this document is that Paul wrote certainly the first part of it while he was in prison.
- He refers to this four times in the letter, all of them in this chapter.

Sermon - rejoicing in suffering from persecution

- It was traditionally thought that he wrote this while he was in prison in Rome, at the end of his fourth and final missionary journey.
- And yet, the book of Acts records a number of different occasions when Paul ended up in prison.
- In fact, when he first went to Philippi he ended up in prison there.
- There is a whole story about this in Acts 16: I hope you are familiar with the one where Paul and his companion Silas are imprisoned, and during the night as they sing hymns an earthquake releases them, and they end up baptising the jailer and his family.
- This is why Paul is able to say at the end of chapter one:

For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well - since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have. (Philippians 1.29-30)

- Simply put, Paul is saying: You saw me in prison when I was with you, and guess what? I'm in prison again!
- Researchers are now more confident that he wrote this letter on one of the occasions that he was in prison in Ephesus.

Paul rejoices at his suffering

- And yet Paul is anything but dismayed at being in prison.
- He sees the hand of God in this suffering, to the point of being quite upbeat about it.
- In verses 12 to 14 he writes:

I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the sisters and brothers, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.
- Paul recognises that those events that lead to suffering on account of the gospel - suffering because one is daring to take a stand on what is loving, and light-bearing, and life-giving - those situations are used by God to grow his kingdom.
- This is why Paul sees this kind of suffering as a privilege, that God is actively using his people to spread the good news of God's grace.
- Paul writes this at the end of the chapter: *For God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well* - the privilege of suffering for Christ!
- This should inform us about where Paul is coming from in much of his letters when he talks about his own suffering.
- He looks at Jesus suffering on the cross, giving of himself in costly love, and rejoices at being able to share in this kind of giving of himself.
- When we give of ourselves in a way that costs us, to enable others to be blessed, then we are like Paul in sharing in the suffering of Christ.
- As Paul says: what a privilege it is to be able to share in the cost of proclaiming God's grace.
- Our culture is one of comfort and convenience, and there is an assumption that it is better to avoid any discomfort and inconvenience.
- But Paul encourages the early church community of Philippi to see how God is using their discomfort and inconvenience to further his kingdom.
- And the church of Philippi, in preserving Paul's letters to them, have shared that same insight with us.
- I will end with Paul's prayer of thanksgiving for our distant Christian forebears in Philippi:

Sermon - rejoicing in suffering from persecution

this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1.9-11) Amen.