

Sermon - Encouragement and thanksgiving

Based on Philippians 4.2-4.18 (NRSV)

Encouragement and thanksgiving

- At first glance the final chapter of Philippians might not seem to have much structure, or any pointed thrust of a theological argument.
- The overall tone of this chapter - even more than the rest of the letter - is that of Paul expressing happiness alongside encouragement.
- Nevertheless, even though Paul seems to touch on a number of things, we can discern two main themes: being aligned with the mind of Christ, and Paul's thankfulness for their generosity.
- The first half of the chapter starts by addressing some disagreement between two hard-working members, and then extends his advice to them to include the whole congregation.
- I am conscious that in chapter 18 from Matthew's Gospel that we explored last month, we had the words of Jesus teaching us how to get along with each other within the church community.
- These words of Paul make a good parallel passage, as he likewise encourages the members of the church community to make a point of getting along with each other.

Some interesting names

- Before exploring this further, I'll make a few comments about the people mentioned at the start of the passage.
- Euodia means '*fragrant*', but the word was apparently also used colloquially to mean '*journey well*'.
- (Perhaps the idea was that if one arrived at the end of a journey still smelling good, then one had had a good journey! It's an amusing thought.)
- Personally, I like the name because it has all five vowels, with only one consonant.
- The Standard Version of the Bible - also called the King James Version - has the name as Euodias, which is the masculine version.
- But this has been corrected in more modern versions to reflect the earlier copies of this letter that are now available to us.
- The other name is Syntyche, which is '*with fate*' - meaning '*fortunate*'.
- A third person whose name might be mentioned is Paul's '*loyal companion*'.
- The Greek word for '*loyal companion*' is *Syzygus* - but some scholars suggest that the word is also the name of that person - and we know from other letters that Paul delighted in playing on the meaning of people's names, when appropriate.

The same mind in the Lord

- So it appears that Euodia and Syntyche - Fragrant and Fortunate - have not been '*of the same mind*' (*Ph 4.2*).

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- Paul has a high regard for Euodia and Syntyche, and he makes sure that they are not to be treated as having less worth or value just because of their unresolved difference of opinion.
- He appeals not only to them, but also appeals to the loyal companion - possibly the one who is carrying the letter to them - to help them *'be of the same mind in the Lord'* (Ph 4.2)
- Also, Paul does not take sides: at least he doesn't take Euodia's side or Syntyche's side - but he does take the Lord's side in this.
- And even though Paul seems to be more chit-chatty than theological in how he expresses himself, he is making a profound point for all of us.
- Because he's not so much trying to get them to be in agreement with each other, but rather trying to get them to *'be of the same mind in the Lord'* (Ph 4.2) - that is, to both be in agreement with the Lord.

How to achieve being of this same mind

- And then Paul gives some direction about how to achieve that, and I'm going to read these verses - verses 4 to 9 - from Eugene Peterson's version of the Bible called The Message:
*Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side working with them and not against them...
Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life. Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious - the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies. (Ph 4.4-9)*
- So while Paul ends up addressing the whole congregation with this, it is pertinent to recognise that if Euodia and Syntyche focused their efforts in this way, then they would indeed find themselves to *'be of the same mind in the Lord'* (Ph 4.2)

The blessing of God's Shalom

- In the midst of those verses is Paul's description of the peace of God:
the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Ph 4.7)
- Hopefully you will recognise the familiar blessing that is often used at the end of our services:
The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God almighty ... - and so on.

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Thanks for gifts

- Apart from the last few verses in which he shares greetings with the congregation, the rest of the chapter consists of Paul thanking the Philippians for gifts they have sent him to help him with the situation he was in at the time of writing.
- If the whole document that we refer to as Philippians was compiled from possibly three different actual letters that Paul wrote to them - as researchers suggest - then the wording here suggests that chapter 4 was from the first letter.
- And the Philippian congregation, having possibly heard that Paul was in prison - probably in Ephesus - and needing help to supply his needs there, sent some gifts with Epaphroditus.
- And Paul explains to them his attitude towards these gifts, making three general points.

The most generous church

- Firstly, he says that ultimately he does not actually need anything, because he has learnt to be completely satisfied through his faith relationship with the Lord.
- So that regardless of whether he is well-fed or hungry, whether he has plenty or is destitute, he can be content in himself.
- It's when Paul makes comments like this that we realise not only what strength of character he had, but also what a profound faith he had.

- Secondly, he notes that they have been the church community that has been the most generous to him: they have shared in his distress, they have sent him gifts a number of times when he was in Thessalonica, and they have distinguished themselves as a church community who have '*shared with [him] in the matter of giving and receiving*' (Ph 4.15)
- It's interesting to register that not all of the early church communities at the time understood how to do that effectively, to both receive from others graciously and to be generous in their own giving.
- The Philippian church community was clearly one that all churches can aspire to emulate.

The sacrificial gift

- And then thirdly, Paul emphasises how their giving is really of benefit to them - and it is this benefit to them that motivates him to welcome their gifts.
- He describes their gifts as '*a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God*' (Ph 4.18)
- This ties in with Paul's reference in chapter 2 to '*the sacrifice and the offering of your faith*' (Ph 2.17), and resonates with our own post-communion prayer when we say '*Father, we offer ourselves to you as a living sacrifice*' (APBA, p144).
- The fundamental notion underlying the concept of sacrifice is that of giving something that is of value to us for the benefit of another.
- The thing of value that is given might be food or drink, or it might be something less tangible, like love or faith.

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- And when it is given to God, then it is a way of acknowledging and honouring and worshipping the Lord.
- And so Paul says to the Philippians that their gifts to him are not just a blessing to him, but even more significantly also count as *'a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God'* (Ph 4.18), that God will honour by blessing them in turn.

Finally, rejoice!

- I am going to conclude not only the sermon, but also our journey through Paul's happiest letter by reminding you of the highlights from all four chapters.
- In chapter 1 Paul describes how his time in prison in Ephesus was being used by God to help spread the Gospel, and that it was a privilege to be able to share in this way in Christ's suffering.
- Paul encourages the Philippians to have this same attitude: *'For God has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well'* (Ph 1.29)
- In chapter 2 Paul quotes the hymn of Christ's humility and glory, and then emphasises the importance of Christians sharing in Christ's attitude of humility - not humiliation, but humbleness - in how they interact with and treat others.
- In chapter 3 Paul contrasts righteousness according to the law with the value of knowing Christ: the idea of reducing harm by complying with regulations compared to nurturing life through our faith relationship in the Lord.
- And of course in chapter 4 Paul speaks words of encouragement to share in the mind of Christ, and gives thanks for the Philippians' blessed generosity.

- Finally, the word that Paul uses the most in this letter is *Rejoice*.
- Over and over again he encourages them: *'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.'* (Ph 4.4)
- And so I end by giving you that same encouragement: *'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.'*