

Sunday 20th September 2020**Online Sermon****Philippians 1 v19-30****Following Jesus' Example****Introduction – Headstone Epitaph**

Over the summer, the North family took a break down in Eastbourne. I love walking along the coast and hiking up and down the downs. On one of those hikes we stumbled into a graveyard where we found a summary of today's passage etched onto a headstone, it read 'with Christ which is better.'

It was my wife who commented first on these words as such a great epitaph. Within they recognise that life is a gift and whilst we have it, we should use it for God's glory. But then in death we have nothing to fear. Christ has walked the path of death and resurrection before us, he has shown us the way. When Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians he was in prison and did not know whether he would be released or see his friends in Philippi ever again.

It is in this time of uncertainty that Paul reflects on his life and he writes 'For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is necessary for you that I remain in the body' (Philippians 1 v21-24)

Paul can see the benefit of living he still has so much to offer, he knows that his friends need him and so his death would be hard for them and yet to be reunited with his Lord and Saviour is his ultimate desire and besides the separation from his brothers and sisters in Christ would only be temporary. Because through Jesus the Christian has that hope and promise of the resurrected life.

In your own journey of faith, can you say those words? 'To live is for Christ but to die would be gain!'

Personally, I can see and know the truth of those words, but selfishly I am not ready for heaven, I feel I still have much to do here on earth. I want to see my children grow up, I would love to become a grandparent.

More than a Reflection on Mortality

It is unfortunate that our bible reading today started where it did. Coming in at verse 19 we could think that this passage is solely about Paul facing up to the limits of his mortality. But there is a deeper level to Paul's reflections.

Paul had been called by God to be an evangelist to the gentiles and to support the fledgling church. How frustrating it must have been then to be trapped in prison? The one call he was sure of in his life, he was now being prohibited from doing.

As a church leader navigating lock down and the continuing restrictions resulting from Covid has been a challenge. Our church has had to rethink how we implement our ministry, sitting still and doing nothing was never an option and so we have reviewed and adapted. I am sure as restrictions change, that process of review and respond will continue.

In Paul's case, as he found his ministry stopped, he reviewed and adapted, he saw his predicament as an opportunity. An opportunity to evangelise to a new audience, the palace guards! He also took pen to paper, writing letters to the churches to encourage and guide them. I doubt if Paul realised it at the time, but God was using his situation, to ensure that his words would benefit the church for centuries to come and so here we are 2000 years later benefiting from those imprisoned words, reflecting on his words of wisdom.

God is Still at Work

In a similar vein, I believe that God has been at work throughout the church in lockdown, forcing us to change.

One example would be, that lockdown forced many churches to get more tech savvy, giving them an online presence, which would reach out to a much broader audience. With my own sermons I have been amazed, that it is not just our own immediate church family that tune in, but quite literally people from all around the world.

If we look back to verses 12 to 18, Paul's dilemma is not just restricted to his ministry, but also to the stories of what he hears is happening in the outside world.

On the Side Lines

When I used to play 11 aside football, there was nothing more frustrating than standing on the side-lines as a substitute, especially when you could see things were not going well. You just wanted the nod from the coach, so that you could get out on the pitch and start making a difference.

I believe that Paul must have found his situation frustrating. Chained to a guard, and unable to get out to the churches in person. Within those verses will notice that Paul face two challenges:

- 1) His imprisonment.
- 2) And the motives of other preachers and teachers.

We have dealt in part with the imprisonment side of things, so let us briefly look at the other teachers.

The Wrong Motives

It would be so easy given Pauls current situation to be self-righteous about the motive and attitude of other teachers.

But instead he gives quite a measured if not philosophical response.

In verses 15 to 18 we read:

¹⁵It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. ¹⁶The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. ¹⁷The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. ¹⁸But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. **(Philippians 1 v 15-18)**

Here Pauls reflection links back to our sermon last week on Romans 14, and the question 'does it really matter?' Paul could get hot under the collar about the motives of these other preachers, but he is wise enough to know, that it is not his place to judge. God knows our hearts, and one day we will all have to stand before the judgement seat of Christ and give account of our words and actions.

For Paul the issue is less about motive and more about what is being preached. If these teachers are preaching the one true gospel and not some heresy then praise God, because Christ can use their words for his glory!

Paul's Final Advice

As Paul closes this section of the letter. He encourages his readers to focus on their own lives and behaviour, saying 'Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.'

(Philippians 1 v27)

Paul's advice could be seen as a direct response to the preachers with selfish motives, but likewise it could be in response to his current predicament.

If we take the first option, I remember when I was at a school a teacher who would always say 'just worry about your own work and not what other people are doing!' He would usually say this in response to a child in our class, who liked to point out any slight indiscretion from another pupil.

You see it is so easy for us to pass comment or judgement on others. Maybe it makes us feel better about ourselves or provides a welcome distraction to our own weaknesses and failings. Here Paul reminds us, not to focus on what others are doing, but to make sure that our lives are in order, that we are conducting ourselves in a manner worthy of Christ and the gospel.

Paul's advice can also be seen in terms of encouraging the church to stay strong despite his current predicament.

When things go wrong, it is easy to blame and to doubt. In Paul's case, there must have been those, who were beginning to question the existence of God, because the situation he found himself in. The logic of their argument would have gone along the lines of:

'If God is real, and you are called by God to this particular task, then why would he allow you to be arrested and imprisoned?'

Paul's response to this is twofold, he says:

¹²Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. ¹³As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard.

Rather than focusing on the why of the situation, or feeling sorry for himself, Paul can see how God is at work. God has presented an opportunity for him. To preach the gospel to those, who otherwise would not have heard it.

He also sees it as an opportunity to encourage the believers to be bolder in their faith/. Rather than succumbing to the fear of persecution he tells them to live out their faith with courageous confidence, as they have nothing to fear.

Paul knew and accepted, that the gift of a place in heaven far outweigh anything that the world could offer or throw at him.

So each one us, should worry less about what others are doing and learn to live out our faith with boldness, for as Moses told the Israelites in the book of Deuteronomy:

'Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or terrified because of them for the Lord your God goes with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you.'

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