



Revd Ro's Reflection on 16th Sunday after Trinity

Proper 20

Year A

Philippians 1.21-30

Matthew 20.1-16

We have now left Romans and our readings for the next few weeks are from Philippians. When I think of Paul's letter to the Philippians, I always think of the great 'Jesus Christ Prayer' (Ch2 v1-13) that is set for next week.

The town of Philippi in northern Greece was conquered by the Macedonians and then occupied by the Romans. It became a Roman colony after the victory of Anthony and Octavian (later the Emperor Augustus) over Brutus and Cassius) in BC 42.

Philippi was the first town in Europe where Paul and Silas preached the good news of Jesus Christ as King and Saviour. The story of this can be found in Acts 16.

¹¹ 'We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis,
¹² 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. ¹³ 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.'

By the time Paul and Silas arrived in Philippi the descendants of those first veterans were living there with the local inhabitants. So the people here were from the three great civilizations. Roman culture was firmly established. They would have believed in the 'Imperial Cult,' that is, the Emperor as Lord and god. He was to be worshipped. Into this cultural mix then, Paul and Silas brought Christianity. They preached Jesus as the only Lord and Saviour who died and rose again to save humanity. To believe this, and to preach it, was very dangerous for these first Christians.

The people of the fledgling church at Philippi are addressed in this letter. Our reading begins at verse twenty one but Paul's letter begins.

¹ 'Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi.'

The tone has a very different feel to the passages we have been looking at from Romans. He is greeting them and encouraging them in the opening to his letter.

³ 'I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴ constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵ because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.'

Paul is in prison, probably in Ephesus AD 52-55 when the letter is written, he obviously has a great fondness for these Christians as he says,

⁸ 'For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.'

Paul explains to them that his arrest has still allowed him to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ and while he has been in prison he has continued to do so, not only that, but people have been emboldened to follow his example and to do the same.

¹² 'I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ;'

Paul knows that the people of the church in Philippi are praying for him and supporting him and he believes he will, in time, be delivered from captivity. After all God has a great deal of work for him to do among the Gentiles.

All this sets the background to help us to understand this week's reading.

'For me, living is Christ and dying is gain,' is a very famous sentence of Paul's. Paul, with his deep belief in Jesus as his risen and redeeming Lord, is quite willing to die. His words 'my desire is to depart and be with Christ,' are interesting, the suggestion is that he will be united with his master Christ after death. That indeed would be true of every Christian. Paul also teaches that God will make a new creation when King Jesus will return and indeed that is what each Christian should work for.

So to him, whether he lives or dies, is acceptable. He will either be found guilty and executed or he will be released. If the latter is the case then he will be able to go on with his work of mission, 'that means fruitful labour for me,'

Of course for him to be united with Christ is the thing that he desires but to live and spread the gospel is the work that needs doing to expand the church and strengthen Christ's followers, 'to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.' Indeed he believes that that will be the outcome and he can continue with Christ's work and he desires to visit them again.

Until then he has advice for them. Whether he can return or not if they live the gospel and walk in Jesus' way then he knows they are, 'standing firm in the spirit.' Like him they will face opposition and persecution, it is not easy to be a Christian in a culture of Emperor Worship! Paul asks them to struggle 'side by side' for the sake of Jesus.

It may be that they will have to endure persecution or even risk death as indeed Paul is doing but by doing this they are living the word of Jesus and following his example. They will receive Jesus' promises of forgiveness and salvation freely given through God's grace to all who turn to him. Paul stresses the fact that they must remain in unity, 'side by side,' so each one of them will be strengthened by the members of this new church.

God's gift of salvation freely given by his grace is the central message of Paul. It is the link to our gospel reading today. Once again it is useful to set the story in its context. Peter has just asked this question in chapter 19.

²⁷ Then Peter said in reply, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?'

Jesus answers, ²⁹ 'and everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.'

However he qualifies this statement with,

³⁰ 'But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.'

So today's gospel reading is really an explanation of that sentence.

If you were one of Jesus' initial hearers of this parable you would probably have felt indignant as indeed the labourers in the story did.

¹¹ And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, ¹² saying, "These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat."

I have done manual labour potato picking as a youngster, it is really hard work. I would have been fed up if someone had come at just before knocking off time when I had been sweating all day and been given the same wages. 'It's not fair,' would have been my cry.

However like all Jesus' parables they are not to be read at simply the literal level, the meaning is profound. On one level he is telling the disciples that even though they have been with him from the beginning, that will bring no special privileges. Really he is addressing Peter's question. It applies to the church through the ages and us today. Position in the church or having been a member for a long time is not the point. All believers are equal in the sight of God and receive all that Jesus won for us.

The story is quite specific, the labourers hired at the beginning, people like the disciples, are no more important to God than those who come to faith later. Each of them receives the same wage, that is forgiveness and salvation through God's grace, salvation won by Jesus Christ at his crucifixion and eternal life with him. The grace of God is freely given to us; it is not something you earn or even deserve, it is a gift from God.

Ours is a generous God, a God who loves us all equally and has a relationship of love with us whether we are new to the faith or have been a Christian forever matters not. What matters is that we believe and try to live in Jesus' way, the way of love. Sincerity of belief and putting that into action is what matters.

The gospel passage is illustrating St. Paul's message to the Philippians, when he is writing to his newly planted church, they are new Christians, new to the faith but they are co-heirs with Christ and inheritors of the promises of God.

Another aspect of this parable could be looked at in terms of forgiveness. Forgiveness is the free gift of God to all who turn to him, to all who are sorry for their sins. He accepts them in love. An example of this in parable form is 'The Prodigal Son.' Think of Jesus' words to the penitent thief. 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' 'I tell you; today you will be with me in paradise.'

'The last will be first and the first will be last,' is a salutary lesson. Those who think themselves important, who think of themselves before others, who think rank is important, are not doing Jesus' will. The danger for them is that selfish concerns block their ability to do what Jesus taught.

Those who think of others and try to serve them in Jesus' name, in love and humility are walking in his way. This was what Jesus meant I think when he says.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.'

This pattern of life as service is summed up by Jesus in his action at the Last Supper,
¹² 'After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? ¹³ You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. ¹⁴ So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I have set you an example that you also should do as I have done to you.'
(John 13)

Jesus gives up everything to come to earth for us, as we will see in Philippians two, 'but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.'

Or as John Betjeman puts it beautifully, 'The maker of the stars and sea, become a child on earth for me.'

The desire to serve God and one another, to live life in Jesus' way is Paul's instruction to the members of the church at Philippi,

'Only live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ.' It is the message for us all.

'Lord of eternity, dwells with humanity, kneels in humility and washes our feet.' Graham Kendrick

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