

31.12.08

Philippians 1:1-27

midweekchurch Philippians 1 (mid)

I love getting mail. As long as it's not a bill, or a circular letter or something that requires too much work, I love getting mail. So I was quite amused when I got this piece of mail a couple of years ago. You see it was a brochure, from Inner Faith Travel, offering me an attractive proposal, for what they have called the Rev Stephen Taylor Tour, catchy name isn't it? All I have to do is get a group of 10 Christians together who want to go to Egypt and Israel, and I travel free.

Now the Rev. Stephen Taylor Tour involved such great events as travelling to the Garden Tomb of Jesus where they tell me that I will perform a Communion Service. Going to the Dead Sea where of all the fascinating things we could do, the itinerary has a spot in it where we have a swim with the Rev Stephen, I think that's some sort of endangered species. Then we would go off to the Mount of Beatitudes where the Rev Stephen will read the Sermon on the Mount (I would presume I do it aloud).

Now I felt very honoured to be chosen for such a responsible assignment. Until I found out that every other ordained Presbyterian minister in NSW got one. Oh well, yet another circular letter. Anyway it is good to get letters and occasionally we get letters from important people.

And in about 55AD, the Christians in Philippi got a letter from someone important. They got a letter from their apostle, the apostle Paul. He was imprisoned at the time, most probably in Rome, and he was writing to tell them the news. But the apostle's letters were always quite different from the Postcards and the letters we receive today. For they contained not just news but also teaching and encouragement. And they were so helpful at the time and later on, that the early Church saw that they were inspired by God, and added them to the other inspired writings that today make up our Bibles.

As I said before Paul wrote this letter from prison. Which meant that he was most likely chained to the wall and to a Roman soldier, in an underground cell with very little light, in cold, damp and lonely conditions. This environment would have broken many a man, but not the apostle Paul. For while in prison he seeks to write to many of the Churches that he had helped establish.

Now what do you think would be on Paul's mind? Do you think he's frustrated that he can't do what he wanted to do? Do you think he is depressed at having his personal freedoms so limited? Well he is neither. For the letter opens with a great burst of thankfulness. Thankfulness to God. Why? Because despite his difficulties, the gospel of Jesus Christ is growing all around him.

**1. The growth of the Gospel.** You see Paul sees the gospel as a tree, growing healthier and healthier. It has been planted firstly in the land of Israel by Jesus and has had a great effect. Then others like Paul have taken it throughout Asia, into Europe and now he is in the most important city of his time, Rome. And in each place the gospel has taken root and is growing.

So as Paul starts to compose this letter, he is full of thanks for he remembers what happened when he first came to Philippi. How he seen a vision of a man saying come

over to Greece and when he did, he found himself in Philippi and in just a matter of weeks, a lady called Lydia had become a Christian, he had been thrown into jail, an earthquake hit the town, Paul's prison cell door was thrown open, the Philippian jailer had been converted, a Church had been established and Paul had been kicked out of town. Now that has even more excitement than a Contiki tour.

But in the midst of it all, the gospel had grown a Church in very difficult circumstances. And Paul says in 1:6 that what God had started in the Church, he would carry on to completion.... But since then some 16 years had elapsed and Paul was now in prison again, this time in Rome. He wasn't able to preach the way he wanted to, but even that was not going to stop God's gospel from growing.

For in v 12-18 he says because of his imprisonment the whole palace guard had heard the gospel. And his being taken out of the scene, has meant that others were now taking his place & preaching the gospel of Jesus. So the gospel was also growing in Rome.

But it was also growing within Paul, for toward the end of the chapter Paul thinks about whether he will live or die. And he really doesn't care what happens. But he does know this one thing. That God had given him a fruitful work up to now and he would continue to work through him and in him. The gospel was on the march.

So whereas most of us would see doom and gloom everywhere, Paul has a completely different perspective. For he tries to look at things from a heavenly perspective. What is God doing around him? Where is God on the march? Why would God be allowing this to happen? What is God's plan in all of this? And so rather than being filled with distress, he filled with thankfulness and joy.

So I wonder if we could take a leaf out of Paul's book? Can we not just look at the church in Australia going backwards but look at the massive strides that the Church in Asia, in Africa, in South America is currently making? Can we not just be disappointed in the way that the Church isn't as big as it was when we were growing up and realise that God is doing something right now amongst us, he is bringing people into His kingdom in this place. The gospel is growing. God hasn't left his people. Amazing things are happening right now.

**2. The Foundations of the Gospel.** But how is God working? And what does he want us to do as we work in partnership with Him? Well at the same time that Paul writes of the growth of the gospel, he also discusses the foundations of the gospel. (That is what God is calling us to do to be part of this gospel growth.) And as I looked through this chapter, it seemed to me that the foundations that he was calling us to lay down involved us doing three things.

Firstly we need to pray, like Paul prays in verses 3 to 11. So *prayer* is like one of the roots that help the gospel to grow strong. It has been said that "*You can learn a lot about a person from their prayers, for true prayer reveals our deepest desires.*" Well what can we learn from Paul? In verse 3 he says, "*I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day...*"

Even in a prison cell, even when his missionary journey's have been stalled, Paul can still thank God. He can thank God, for he may be chained, but God's work is never chained. Basically Paul can be thankful because he knows that God is in control. And because he is in control, his mind goes to prayer. For it is in prayer that we talk to the one who has the whole world in his hand.

I know that when I am down, when I am disappointed, when I feel buffeted by what life has thrown at me, prayer has often lifted me out of my self-interest, out of my troubles, out of my sorrow and brought me face to face with the living God. Paul is in prison but his mind, his heart, his soul is communing with God in heaven. For no-one chains the soul of a Christian, no-one can stop them praying.

But I think it is interesting to see what Paul prays for. Notice he doesn't pray for himself on this instance. He doesn't pray for his release from imprisonment or for a relief from his sufferings, that's the sorts of things we probably would pray for if we were in his boots. He prays that the Philippians *"love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ."*

He doesn't pray that they have an easy time. That they get a promotion in their work or that their illnesses be healed, but that they may know about God and how he wants them to live. He prays for knowledge of God and depth of insight into what God is doing. And righteousness so that God may more and more take over their life.

You see the first foundation for the growth in the gospel is prayer. For ultimately it is not what we do that is important, but it is what God will do. The gospel only grows when God intervenes in people's lives. And so in prayer we ask for growth in people's faith, in conversion, and for their love for others to increase.

I read recently about a woman who training to be a nurse. One day the Prof. came in and said some horrible words, "We're going to have a quick quiz!" So this nurse made it through the quiz, until she got to the last question. It read, "What is the name of the woman who cleans the school?" She thought she read it wrong! She had seen an older lady who cleaned, but how was she supposed to know her name?

After the quiz, one student asked, "Is that last question going to count?" "Yes, it's going to count. (For) you're going to meet a lot of people when you get out into this field. You may be tempted to treat them as diseases instead of as people. But each one is important and each one has a name. And by the way, her name is Dorothy."

Friend's Paul is praying that our love for others will increase. For there are lots of Dorothy's out there - cleaning buildings, stacking shelves, sitting next to you on the bus. God wants you to love them as well. And prayer is where we start. But it is not where we end. For the next foundation of the gospel is **preaching**.

Somehow through our lives and our words working together we need to communicate God's wonderful grace. For if Paul's first thought is prayer, his second thought is

preaching. He is in chains and unable to do the work that God has set him apart for. But Paul is overjoyed by the fact that his fellow Christians have taken up the slack, they have been encouraged to step into the apostle's shoes and take his place.

Is Paul disappointed about that? Is Paul jealous of his fellow Christians? Or is he telling them to stop because only he can do that job? No, he is overjoyed, for Christianity is not about one person doing the work of the gospel, it is about a partnership. It is the Church working together on its one great task - to tell people about Jesus.

Paul was chained, but his message was not. Paul may be in prison, but his brothers and sisters have been encouraged to complete his task. And so instead of one preacher, there are now many. And what would have seemed like a major set-back has become a major stimuli. This formulae has proved so time and time again. When Christian leaders are persecuted, imprisoned, killed, the Church grows. That is what has happened in Russia, in China, in fact throughout the world.

For the Church is at its best when everyone is involved in preaching. Not from the pulpit but from their lives, in their homes, at work among their friends. Now Paul points out that some are doing this from false motives, may be that is true of some of those tele evangelists, but he doesn't mind as long as Christ is preached. And for that he rejoices despite his present circumstances.

Friends, preaching and teaching is still God's way of growing the Church. For it is God's word about God son that helps grow God's kingdom. And each one of us communicates a good sermon about Jesus or a bad one by the way that we live out our daily lives. But the last foundation of the gospel is *perseverance*.

It is not just enough to pray and to preach, Paul knows we have to hang on to the very end. It is no good making a good start, and then falling somewhere near the finishing line. It doesn't help the cause of the gospel if we cope well with the easy parts in our Christians lives and then fall apart when the going gets tough. So he says to the Church "so whatever happens, conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel."

So if we are persecuted, imprisoned, ridiculed, sick, depressed, alone, frightened, or tempted, the question we have to ask ourselves is what can I do to cause the growth of the gospel? What will please God? What will be a good witness? What will show others the truth about Jesus?

I was once talking to a guy and I asked him about his faith. He told me that his mum used to take him to Sunday school but when he was in primary school she wanted to get remarried and the local minister wouldn't do it. So she never went back to Church again and neither did the family. Now in her pain has she been a good witness?

Compare her to the people of Cuba. They have been persecuted for the last 30 years, but that hasn't stopped the growth of the Church, its accelerated it! Why? Listen to what one Cuban Christian has said "*the search for meaning is just as crucial as the search for bread. While the economy around us is falling apart, Christians are living in a state of special grace. It is not difficult for Cubans to see the difference between*

*the people of God and those who are desperately trying to live without faith. Ordinary Cubans are aware of the Church as a life saving community of faith."*

Paul reminds us of the growth of the gospel. Why? Because ordinary Christians are willing to pray, to preach and to persevere. But what is the fruit of this growth?

Simply when the gospel affects a community and individuals there is a growth in **righteousness**, see v.11. The gospel changes the way we live and so we put off sin and put on righteousness. It also gives praise and **glory** to God, we can magnify His name. Our lives glorify our great King. We **work** for others. Like Paul in verse 24, we lay aside our own needs and desires in order to look after the needs of others.

But the overriding fruit of a life lived for God is **joy**, joy. Our world tells us to chase after happiness. Our world tells us that the more you own, the more you will love life. Our world says don't worry about others, just think about yourself. And yet in our world today, we are richer, healthier, freer, and more self absorbed, and yet we are dying because none of these things bring us joy.

This evening though Paul gives us another perspective, a gospel perspective. Don't just look at your own circumstances, look at what God is doing. He is in control. He is growing his Church. He is working through all things. And these things are the source of real joy. And joy comes from Jesus.

So as I end, can I ask you is there joy, in your life, real joy? For joy is the fruit of the growth in the gospel. Joy is in proportion to the amount of trust you have in Jesus. So if you lack joy, maybe you have taken your eyes off Jesus.

I like the story about the 3 prospectors who found a rich vein of gold in California during the gold rush days. They realized what a great discovery they had, & decided, "We've a really good thing going here as long as no one else finds out about it." So they each took a vow to keep it secret. Then they headed for town to file their claims & get the equipment necessary to mine the gold. True to their vows, they didn't say a word to anybody. They filed their claim, bought the equipment, & headed back to their mine. But when they did, a crowd of people followed them.

And the reason was because the expression on their faces had given them away. Their faces were aglow in anticipation of the wealth that soon would be theirs. People knew that they must have found something very special. So a crowd followed them all the way out of town. In the same way I wonder if others can see the joy of the Lord on our faces? Yes the gospel is growing throughout the world. Yes God is doing something amongst us here in this Church. But is he working in you as well? So much so that your joy is contagious!

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What makes this more amazing is that he is writing this letter from a Roman prison. We're talking about a place that makes the abuse of prisoners in Iraq pale by comparison. Dark, dank, dismal and deadly, Roman prisons were usually the last stop before death. Yet through all of this Paul saw the light of Christ being sent to the world. He saw the freshness of the Holy Spirit blowing into lives across Asia Minor and Southern Europe. He experiences a sense of hope that no matter what situations he faced Christ would continue to be preached. And instead of a deadly last stop Paul knew that Jesus was the life-giver and that the life He gave could not be taken away by Rome or anyone else. That is JOY.

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ILL.- A man asked the preacher, "How many active members do you have in your church?" The preacher said, "They're all active. Half of them are working with me and half of them are working against me."

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ILL.- Although preacher George Whitefield disagreed with John Wesley on some theological matters, he was careful not to create problems in public that could be used to hinder the preaching of the gospel. When someone asked Whitefield if he thought he would see Wesley in heaven, Whitefield replied, "I fear not, for he will be so near the eternal throne and we at such a distance, we shall hardly get sight of him."

That's the humble attitude that we should have toward one another.

Phil. 2:3 "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves."

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A.W. Tozer in *The Pursuit of God* said, "Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other?"

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Albert Einstein, the great physicist and *TIME* magazine's Man of the Century was once traveling on a train when the conductor came down the aisle punching tickets. When he came to Einstein, Einstein reached in his vest pocket. He couldn't find his ticket, so he reached in his other pocket. It wasn't there, so he looked in his briefcase but he couldn't find it. Then he looked in the seat beside him. He couldn't find it.

The conductor said, "Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it."

The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. As he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and saw the great physicist on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket. The conductor rushed back. "Dr. Einstein, don't worry", he said, "I know who you are. No problem. You don't need a ticket. I'm sure you bought one."

Einstein said, "Young man, I too know who I am. What I don't know is where I am going."

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ILL. Did you hear the story about the 300-lb. man who went to his preacher & said, "Preacher, I'm so depressed. I've tried to lose weight & I can't. I can't even get a date. I feel like an outcast in society. Can you help me?" The preacher said, "Well, I think I can. Go home & be ready at 8 o'clock tomorrow morning."

So at exactly 8:00 the next morning his doorbell rang & the man opened the door expecting the preacher to be there. But instead, there stood a beautiful girl dressed in a sleek jogging outfit who purred, "The preacher says that if you can catch me I'm yours." Then she took off running. Well, this guy took off after her, huffing & puffing. Of course, he couldn't catch her.

Well, this went on for 6 months. Every morning she was there. He chased her for 6 months & lost 125 pounds, & the next to the last morning, he almost caught her. Well, he could hardly wait for the next day to come because he knew that he would catch her that morning for sure. The next morning the doorbell rang. He opened it eagerly, & there stood a 300-lb. woman. She said, "The preacher said that if I can catch you, you're mine."

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Dr. Viktor Frankl, author of the book *Man's Search For Meaning*, was imprisoned by the Nazis in the Second World War because he was a Jew. His wife, his children, and his parents were all killed in the holocaust. The Gestapo made him strip. He stood there totally naked. As they cut away his wedding band, Viktor said to himself. "You can take away my wife, you can take away my children, you can strip me of my clothes and my freedom, but there is one thing no person can EVER take away from me -- and that is my freedom to choose how I will react to what happens to me!" Even under the most difficult of circumstances, happiness is a choice which transforms our tragedies into triumph.

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Happiness has to do with circumstances, things that are happening in your life. Joy, on the other hand is a Christian Word. It is a word that arises out of the Christian faith. Billy Sunday said if there is no joy in your religion then there is a leaky vessel, a leak in your Christianity somewhere. Joy is something that comes from Jesus

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Arthur Fry, a chemist at 3M Corporation, was having

problems in the choir loft.  
The pastor's sermon was especially boring.  
So Arthur began putting slips of paper in the hymnal  
for upcoming songs.  
But the slips kept fluttering to the floor.

Then he remembered researcher Spence Silver's discovery.

Silver had mixed an unusual amount of monomer into a  
polymer-based adhesive he was working on.  
The result was a "tacky" adhesive.  
It stuck, but not well.  
The company had no use for it.

Arthur Fry went to work, dabbed some of the adhesive on  
slips of paper, and stuck them around the office.  
They stayed, yet not so strongly they damaged surfaces  
when pulled off.  
Today Post-It notes are found in every office in America,  
and pull in big bucks for 3M.  
It seems a lot of people need help with their memories.

It also shows you that even boring sermons can be  
profitable!

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There is a phrase, "Turning lemon into lemonade, " which is use to mean that one can  
take the bad and sour things of life and make it good. If you go away this morning  
thinking I've taught you how to turn the lemons in your life into sweet lemonade,  
you've missed the point. I started out by uncovering a lie, the lie that bad things don't  
happen to good people. The truth is bad things do happen to good people, even to  
God's people.

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It's something like what Coach John McKay of USC said to his team after they had  
been humiliated 51-0 by Notre Dame. McKay came into the locker room and saw a  
group of beaten worn-out and thoroughly depressed young football players who were  
not accustomed to losing. He stood up on a bench and said, "Men, let's keep this in  
perspective. There are 800 million Chinese who don't even know this game was  
played." That's what you call perspective.

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The poet puts it this way:  
"One ship drives east, another drives west with the self same winds that blow.  
'Tis the set of the sails & not the gales which determines the way we go,"