

Advent Reflections

Dear Brothers and Sisters

This Advent we take as a theme for reflection and study Paul's letter to the new church in Philippi ("Philippians"). Paul's message is strongly centred on sharing the Gospel message, the Good News about Jesus Christ. Paul expresses his love for the members of that church and encourages them to share the message he'd originally passed on to them.

His short visit to Philippi (read all about it in Acts 16) was punctuated by the cleansing of a slave girl from an unclean spirit that gave her fortune-telling powers, a beating, an imprisonment, a miracle, the conversion of a jailer and a drumming out-of-town.

Paul writes from prison in Rome.

As usual, each reflection will have a Bible passage, some thoughts, a question or two and a prayer. The questions are more for thinking about than answering directly. We'll include the odd internet link – just click on the link and it should take you to YouTube or another web address.

Encourage others

We have a number of people from outside the Benefice who receive this email, and so far, none of them has asked to stop receiving! We still have quite a few people in our benefice who do not receive these mailings, and I'd encourage you, if you know the email address of someone in that situation or would like a friend or family member to receive this, simply to forward each message on.

Did someone encourage you?

If you email me (paul@wtandw.org.uk) I'm happy to add you to the distribution list. You will not be placed on any other list and you can email to unsubscribe at any time.

With Blessings,

Paul

December 2

Philippians 1.1-2

From Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus. To all of God's people who belong to Christ Jesus at Philippi and to all of your church officials and officers.

I pray that God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ will be kind to you and will bless you with peace!

Paul starts his letter in the usual way, with a greeting. There's no home address, though the content of this letter suggests that Paul has written this letter from prison. Paul had visited Philippi along with his companion Silas. In Acts 16:12 we read that Paul spent several days in Philippi. During that time, he'd met with a group of women by the river and baptised the family of one of them, who had offered her house for Paul and Silas to stay in. There is a disturbing event where Paul and Silas are arrested, stripped and beaten and left in prison. An angel releases them. I'll leave you to read the story for yourself - Acts 16:12-40.

We don't know whether Paul wrote other letters to this church. All we have is what has survived. It's probable that letters like this were copied and sent to other churches to hear, which means that they had a better chance of survival. Those that have come down to us contain a wealth of teaching and insight into the person of Christ Jesus and a good picture of how the Early Church worked.

Paul did not have long in Philippi. This is interesting, as he had been called to this area in a vision and had found himself unable to get where was originally planning to go. I wonder what Paul might have said in the short time he had to so convince people of the truth of the Gospel that they were ready to accept the faith and live by it.

What are the main points you'd make if you had five minutes to convince someone of the truth of the Gospel? One minute?

Thinking of Acts 16:25-26 (did you read the passage?), have you had a "my chains fell off" experience, and if you have, who have you shared it with?

Father God, I want to sense the rush of excitement and the overflowing of love that Paul reveals in this letter. Instil in me a love for your Gospel and the compulsion to share it with the world around me. Amen.

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December 3

Philippians 1.3-5

Every time I think of you, I thank my God. And whenever I mention you in my prayers, it makes me happy.

This is because you have taken part with me in spreading the good news from the first Day you heard about it.

Paul writes to these people as if they'd been his friends for years, though in reality he'd not spent much time with them. It was a brief encounter at Philippi, and Paul had visited many other places and had established many churches on the course of his journeys around the Roman provinces. Yet he still remembers this church with the same affection and gratitude as any of the others.

Notice that these new Christians were engaged from the very start in sharing the Gospel message (the Good News) that they'd only just heard. Many "established" Christians shrivel up at the thought of sharing their faith with others. To argue, "My religion is private to me", would simply not make any sense to Paul. To be blunt, it is not a good excuse today, either.

Paul's first converts were probably from among the Jewish women who met by the river. There were not enough Jewish men to form a synagogue, so the women met in an open place to pray (Acts 16:13-15). That's where Paul went first of all. We don't know what the men did. It is probable that Lydia, a businesswoman who dealt in purple cloth, was single, as the story in Acts refers to her house and her household rather than to a husband's or father's. Paul was able to tell the Gospel message of Jesus from within the Jewish history and scriptures. Philippi was a Roman colony and on a major trade route, so it would be inhabited by people from all round the world. For this church to grow amongst non-Jewish converts there would be no background or canvas on which to paint Jesus, and so the traditions, the practices and the forms of synagogue worship will have meant nothing to them. While there were people from many cultures who had come to Philippi, the majority were Hellenist (i.e. Greek or following Greek culture).

The new church had to learn an important lesson. There was no point in trying to reach out to people with a message steeped in a tradition they did not know. This is as important a lesson then as it is today.

What Paul established within this small congregation was not a liturgy or a choir and organist/music group. His task before God was to preach the Gospel message and make and train up disciples to go out to evangelise the colony. They really were starting from scratch - no evangelism courses been published yet. Paul's letters were largely the only information and teaching they had.

All this new body of believers could offer was their recent experience of the Lord Jesus in their life.

What do you value in the Bible?

What do you value in tradition?

How do you share the Good News with someone who does not have your faith background? Or, putting it another way, what is the Good News for an unchurched generation?

What can you share about your experience of Jesus Christ with others?

Father God, in comparison to what Paul expected of the new Christians at Philippi my life may be rather quiet and inactive. Stir me to compassion and action to see the Gospel message proclaimed in my neighbourhood. Amen.

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December 4

Philippians 1.6

God is the one who began this good work in you, and I am certain that he won't stop before it is complete on the Day that Christ Jesus returns.

It is worth wondering at what point you'd say that a group of people like these who met by the river and possibly in Lydia's house can be described as a church. Paul is clearly thinking about them as a church when he writes about how God will continue and complete His work in them.

What exactly is this good work that God has begun? It is at least twofold. It is the bringing of a person to a turning point in response to the truth of the Gospel message. Belief is no more than assent. The Gospel message is about *transformation* – new life in Jesus. The Gospel message demands a turnaround in the one who accepts it. The second aspect is about bringing Christians together as Church, the Body of Christ in the neighbourhood. The good work begun by God is continued in the corporate life of the Philippian church.

Paul talks about this work as ongoing. He is confident that God will continue what He started. God expects the new Christian to grow in faith and witness, but he also expects those who are mature to continue to grow and to mature further. There is no neutral gear in Christian life and witness. There is only forward. Anything else, including neutral, will push you back.

What gear are you in in your Christian life at the moment? Is it forward with God?

Why does God call Christians together as Church? Why is it unwise for a Christian to operate independently?

What is the good work that we as church are called to? How well is that work progressing?

Father God, teach me how I may use the gifts you give me are for the building up of the Body of Christ and for its witness to the world. Amen.

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December 5

Philippians 1.7

You have a special place in my heart. So it is only natural for me to feel the way I do.

All of you have helped in the work that God has given me, as I defend the good news and tell about it here in jail.

Paul is writing to a small group of new believers. It seems as if they had to hit the ground running – converted in the morning, and witnessing in the afternoon! I continue to wonder what Paul had managed to teach them in the time he had. He didn't know when he'd be leaving, so he'd have to prioritise what he had to share. Some of us have been Christian for a long time. Over twenty years you will have read and heard the Gospel many times, listened to a thousand sermons in a thousand services, been part of a thousand intercessions of your church. Have you shared the Gospel message with a thousand people?

The new converts of Philippi were raw recruits. In Paul they had both a remarkable teacher and a remarkable evangelist. Paul is pleased that all of them have played a part in the work God gave him.

In Acts 16 we read that Paul stayed in Philippi for "several days". That has to be less than a month and possibly less than a couple of weeks that Paul had in which to offer them an intensive grounding in faith and witness. Consider this back-of-an-envelope outline for a framework for growth:

Lesson 1 – Basics of our faith: Who is Jesus? What did he do? Why did he do it? Why is this personal?

Lesson 2 – How to share this with others.

Lesson 3 – How to meet and grow as church.

Lesson 4 – Advanced topics: Father God and The Holy Spirit.

Note where sharing your faith comes in the order.

How much do I need to know before I can share my faith?

Where might I be best used by God to share my faith?

What do I say when someone asks me a hard question that I haven't the answer to?

Father God, I can try to argue that I am not equipped through lack of knowledge to spread the Gospel message. However, such arguments do not convince you, and I know that I'm actually apprehensive. Set a fire in my heart. Amen.

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December 6

Philippians 1.8-11

God himself knows how much I want to see you. He knows that I care for you in the same way that Christ Jesus does.

I pray that your love will keep on growing and that you will fully know and understand how to make the right choices. Then you will still be pure and innocent when Christ returns.

And until that day, Jesus Christ will keep you busy doing good deeds that bring glory and praise to God.

How does Christ Jesus care for his Church? As a bridegroom cares about his bride. Is she not the loveliest, most beautiful, most pure creature to grace the aisle on her wedding day? This is how much Christ Jesus loves and cares for his Church – the Body that he promised to build, through which he chooses to present himself.

It is the destiny of the Church to be the Bride of Christ in heaven. On earth we are his Body. He has bequeathed himself to us, for we are the Body of Christ. Would not Jesus care about his Body being honoured by Father God in all that we do as Church? As individuals he cares about us, and he is interceding for us before Father God in heaven. What better and more effective intercessor could we have?

Paul aligns his sense of care with that of Jesus. Paul's prayer is that this fledgling church in Philippi does not stay the same, but grows in understanding and wisdom. He knows, too, that Christ Jesus desires to see His Body active and growing in love, in number, in depth and influence.

Every church should consider whether their activities are Christ-led. Here are two extracts from a church website (slightly edited):

...Our church strives to live Christ's word daily by our commitment to worship, stewardship, faith formation, family and social outreach.

...Bingo was established as a way to supplement the income gained through Church collections, bequests, and other donations. Being our biggest Parish fundraiser, bingo is an important element in keeping our Parish alive, and flourishing.

What sort of busy-ness does Christ Jesus require of us?

How am I as a Church member responding to that request?

What sort of funding does a church require?

Father God, widen my vision to enable me to see what Christ Jesus is doing in his Church. Enable me to see those I worship with as members of his Body, being purified and made holy as his Bride for eternity. Amen.

December 7

Philippians 1:12-17

My dear friends, I want you to know that what has happened to me has helped to spread the good news. The Roman guards and all the others know that I am here in jail because I serve Christ. Now most of the Lord's followers have become brave and are fearlessly telling the message.

It seems that you cannot go far in Christian life without encountering something that challenges any notions of a cosy faith. Paul is in prison for preaching the Gospel. I need not go into the catalogue of suffering that he went through in carrying out the mission God gave him. Perhaps we are not all meant to suffer like Paul, but I think we do need to be aware that there is a fight going on in spiritual realms. There will be opposition or persecution for those live Jesus' life and who spread his Gospel. It was not for nothing that Paul urged us to put on the full armour of God so that we might fight and withstand the spiritual forces of evil (read Ephesians 6:10-18).

While in jail Paul has not only made it clear to everyone that he is a Christian, not just by faith but by his visible service to Christ Jesus, or even because that was why he was there in the first place! Even here he is still preaching the message, and others are becoming emboldened through it. We do not know if any of these were already Christian or became Christian. Either way, there is a boldness that has overtaken them as they share the Gospel message with what might be the lower echelons of society in that prison. Even the Roman guards, not known for their tolerance towards captives and prisoners, knew all about why Paul was there. Even in the darkest places Christ provides a way to share the Gospel message.

Is there a place I visit, a club or group, even a local shop, where I am not known to be a follower of Christ?

What aspect of Christian life or experience do I shy away from, for fear of opposition or ridicule?

Do you know of "darker places" where the Gospel message is not being heard?

Father God, show me if there is anything in my life that needs changing so that I may become an advocate for the Gospel message in places and situations where I have not been one before. Amen.

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December 8

Philippians 1.15-19

Some are preaching about Christ because they are jealous and envious of us. Others are preaching because they want to help. They love Christ and know that I am here to defend the good news about him. But the ones who are jealous of us are not sincere. They just want to cause trouble for me while I am in jail.

But that doesn't matter. All that matters is that people are telling about Christ, whether they are sincere or not. That is what makes me glad. I will keep on being glad, because I know that your prayers and the help that comes from the Spirit of Christ Jesus will keep me safe.

Paul is suggesting that, with him out of the way in prison, there are some who are taking the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel message for their own advantage or status, or perhaps to dishonour Paul himself, rather than do it solely for the glory of God. Paul is not too concerned about it if people are still hearing the Gospel message.

It can be easy for a preacher or leader to be tempted to seek adulation from the congregation. It's easy to seek to be seen as the important one upon whom everyone else depends. It's easy to give people a watered-down message for the sake of a quiet life and in order to avoid addressing the tough parts of the life to which Christ calls us. There is also a danger of highlighting aspects of the Gospel in a way that reflects your own priorities. Woe betide anyone, however, who leads people astray with a false message.

Spend a few moments reading John 6:60-69.

Consider the parable of the sower (Matthew 13:1-9). Where are you planted?

Are there aspects of the Gospel that you have shaped to fit your agenda?

Father God, show me where in my Christian life I have sought an easier path than the one you have placed me on, or where I have sought praise from the world rather than seek to do your will in the world. Take me back to where you have called me to be. Amen.

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December 9

Philippians 1.20-26

I honestly expect and hope that I will never do anything to be ashamed of. Whether I live or die, I always want to be as brave as I am now and bring honour to Christ. If I live, it will be for Christ, and if I die, I will gain even more.

I don't know what to choose. I could keep on living and doing something useful. It is a hard choice to make. I want to die and be with Christ, because that would be much better.

But I know that all of you still need me. That's why I am sure I will stay on to help you grow and be happy in your faith. Then, when I visit you again, you will have good reason to take great pride in Christ Jesus because of me.

Paul is quite serious in weighing up how he can continue to be used by Christ against his desire to see Christ in his glory in heaven. There are some people who would prefer to be dead in order to be out of their suffering or misery, but Paul's life is wholly dedicated to serving Christ Jesus. Paul tells the truth when he says that to live is to live for Christ, and to die is gain, because in death we see Jesus face to face. Paul knows where God has placed him.

Jesus' life was one of complete obedience to Father God. The Father had sent The Son to earth with a mission. The Son took on flesh in human form and lived exclusively for the Father. We can see some of the human relationship tensions that came of this Father/Son relationship when the boy Jesus told his worrying parents that he was doing his Father's business by staying in the Temple with the teachers. He refused to meet his family when they were waiting outside. He told his followers that they should be prepared to hate their families. Even mourning sons should leave others to bury their fathers.

Should we compare our response to God's call with that of Paul's? He was used mightily by God, but he was the right man for the job he was given because of his deep understanding of the Jewish scriptures and his zeal for truth. It does not matter, however, how big the task is that we are assigned. What matters is how we respond to that task and make it a priority for our life.

Paul's hope that he would visit this group of people again, as he was able to do with other churches in the past, is one that we know will not happen.

What is God's plan for you? If you think you don't know then check again, and consider what puts fire in your bones, for that may have something to do with it.

At what age does a Christian retire?

Father God, I want not to fear death itself, but rather see it as the door to eternity. I want to be greeted with the words of the master to the ones in the parable of the talents who multiplied his money. But for now, I'm investing. Amen.

December 10

Philippians 1:27-30

Above all else, you must live in a way that brings honour to the good news about Christ. Then, whether I visit you or not, I will hear that all of you think alike. I will know that you are working together and that you are struggling side by side to get others to believe the good news.

Be brave when you face your enemies. Your courage will show them that they are going to be destroyed, and it will show you that you will be saved. God will make all of this happen, and he has blessed you.

Not only do you have faith in Christ, but you suffer for him. You saw me suffer, and you still hear about my troubles. Now you must suffer in the same way.

Paul is relentless in seeing to it that the Gospel message is preached. Not only does Paul expect his listeners to bring the Gospel message to others, but he also expects that their lives will be consistent with and honouring to the Gospel message.

It might be useful to pause for a moment to consider just what the Gospel message, or the Good News actually is. When Jesus started his ministry, he announced that the kingdom of God was at hand, and that people should repent and believe the Good News. The Good News was the message of the kingdom of God. He spent much of his ministry teaching about the Kingdom, though there were aspects to it that were not yet ready to be revealed openly. For us, the Good News is complete - we have a king who died for us and rose from death to everlasting life. For this world the Good News of the kingdom is that there is a new and better way to live your life as an adopted child of Father God than as a fearful Law-bound sinner destined for death. Jesus preached Kingdom life, Kingdom justice, Kingdom values and Kingdom re-birth, though this could only be achieved through his suffering death on a cross for us and rising to new life.

The Good News is not just about believing in God. It's about accepting the eternal life of God the Son into your life by dying with Christ to your old life and rising with him to his new life into the inheritance of God's riches, living by his new way through his Holy Spirit's power and enabling, having surrendering all that you have for him to use to his glory.

Knowing that, why would any Christian fear the powers of this world?! Paul knows all too well that suffering is part of the Christian experience, that we may know Christ in his sufferings.

Oh to know the power of Your risen life
And to know You in Your sufferings
To become like You
In Your death, my Lord
So with You to live and never die.

Graham Kendrick

How would you start to describe the Good News to a friend?

How much does the suffering of Christ infiltrate into your daily life?

Father God, cause the words of the verse above to be etched on my heart so that I may be able to claim them as my own desire. Amen.

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December 11

Philippians 2.1-5

Christ encourages you, and his love comforts you. God's Spirit unites you, and you are concerned for others. Now make me completely happy! Live in harmony by showing love for each other. Be united in what you think, as if you were only one person.

Don't be jealous or proud, but be humble and consider others more important than yourselves. Care about them as much as you care about yourselves and think the same way that Christ Jesus thought.

Paul reminds his listeners that their Christian walk is not a solitary one. Christ calls us into his Church –a lone Christian cannot function as God intends if he or she avoids the support, care, love and spiritual ministry that the church, individuals coming together as one, affords. We walk together with Christ.

You may find your local church to be less than what Christ has intended for her, but this is not an excuse for church-tourism. Your mission ground is where you live, and you need brother and sister Christians and a fellowship in your neighbourhood.

Paul adds a caution that we should maintain humility and align our thinking to Jesus' thinking.

If my local church seems not to fit my requirements, how can this be put right?

Father God, you know my strengths and my weaknesses and you seek to increase the first and diminish the second. Build up in my fellowship a group of people who care about the Gospel and about each other. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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December 12

Philippians 2:6-11

Christ was truly God. But he did not try to remain equal with God. Instead he gave up everything and became a slave, when he became like one of us.

Christ was humble. He obeyed God and even died on a cross.

Then God gave Christ the highest place and honoured his name above all others. So at the name of Jesus everyone will bow down, those in heaven, on earth, and under the earth. And to the glory of God the Father everyone will openly agree, "Jesus Christ is Lord!"

Imagine yourself as a new convert in Philippi. You have heard Paul's message, or perhaps it was a friend of yours who'd been going to the meeting-place who persuaded you. You've heard something so convincing that you are drawn in.

Don't think for a minute that faith is all about intellect, or even common sense. A Christian who believes only with his head is a dry Christian. Don't ignore the part that emotion plays in our lives – you know that when you heard the Gospel message your breathing slowed a little, then rushed a bit; your heart pounded, your eyes dilated, your ears burned, your head spun, you couldn't stand still. Your heart, your mind, your soul and your strength were all drawn in (see Mark 12:30).

You heard things that made cosmic sense (and what a throwaway line of all throwaway lines can be found in the story of creation where the writer relates: He made the stars also). You heard about a deity who actually loves you and cares for you.

You heard Paul's testimony along with sharp, cogent teaching on the nature of God and salvation. Paul has unlocked the mysteries of time and space with the story of the One who came to his own creation and lived among us. But above all of this, Father God touched your very being, for this was the time he chose for you.

And here this Christian hymn describes in a nutshell just who Jesus was and is – truly God, humbling himself in obedience to death; exalted to the highest place for all creation to worship. God came amongst us. Jesus Christ is Lord!

What did the Son give up and what did he retain when he came to earth?

Father God, I thank you for Jesus, for your Son who came to my world. Thank you that you sent him to die for me, for without that sacrifice I could never know you or become your adopted son. Through his obedience help me see your love for me. In his name. Amen,

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December 13

Philippians 2.12-15

My dear friends, you always obeyed when I was with you. Now that I am away, you should obey even more. So work with fear and trembling to discover what it really means to be saved.

God is working in you to make you willing and able to obey him. Do everything without grumbling or arguing. Then you will be the pure and innocent children of God. You live among people who are crooked and evil, but you must not do anything that they can say is wrong.

Paul is cautious to encourage his listeners to stay obedient to his leadership. It is wise counsel for each one of us to keep self-confidence in check and to trust in God's leading in all situations. Part of growing in God is to trust Him at His word even when the outlook doesn't look too promising.

What Paul says about the world we live in may not be as simple as it sounds. There should be no-one who does not want to shine as a star in a dark world. After all, this is what we are called to. However, stumbling-blocks can crop up – how do I shine as a star when in the past I have not let that light shine? How do I present myself in a new light to my family, my friends, my colleagues (those I work for, those who work with me and those who work under me) and others who've previously only known me as less than light? How do I extricate myself from what I was – I may have joined in the gossip; I may have treated people in a way that does not honour God; I may have been deceitful or untrustworthy? And if I shine out as a star, won't I be in the firing line?

When you accept Christ Jesus into your life you are freed from all the sin of the past. You begin to see with his eyes and think as he thinks. Your attitude towards people and situations changes as you see that Christ's life and influence guide you. You are freed from all the sin of the past – Christians old and new can find this so amazing that they tend not to believe it, so I've repeated it as a reminder that it is completely true. As you grow in Christian life you begin to see more clearly, more deeply, more widely what it is that you've been freed from, and the truth of your salvation becomes more real.

Christ can only shine through you if you allow him in to your life.

The first step is to acknowledge and trust the One who lives within. He will take you closer into his life as you shed your old life. While the power and life truth of Christ within is a fact, the transformation in you may take time. If you desire to live a holy life then you need to turn all aspects of your life towards Christ. He will guide you and give you opportunities. If you feel that you are frightened to share the gospel message with others then start with strangers – you may never have to meet them again! Ask God to allow you to do something godly to a stranger, and see where that takes you. Ask God to guide you in divesting yourself of worldliness – He may guide you away from places you have frequented in the past, or make clearer what you should be reading or watching on TV, how you present yourself to others.

In our benefice we've said that your presence in a village organisation is a Christian witness. To be truthful, it isn't, unless you are prepared to show yourself to be different and to act as a holy child of God in an unholy world. I'm not advocating Bible-bashing – I

am advocating standing for truth, righteousness and holiness when the situation you find yourself in presents the opposites.

How might you seek ways of expressing your faith in a local organisation?

What changes will you need to make to accommodate this?

Father God, it's easier to start afresh with a new group of people than to re-present myself as a Christian to those who weren't aware before. It's not easy, either, to move from being known as a "church-goer" to a seeker of souls for Christ". Prepare the way for me, so that the transition is easier. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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December 14

Philippians 2.15-18

Try to shine as lights among the people of this world, as you hold firmly to the message that gives life. Then on the Day when Christ returns, I can take pride in you. I can also know that my work and efforts were not useless.

Your faith in the Lord and your service are like a sacrifice offered to him. And my own blood may have to be poured out with the sacrifice. If this happens, I will be glad and rejoice with you. In the same way, you should be glad and rejoice with me.

The message that gives life is the Gospel message. It is important for all Christians to know what that is, but in order to share it with others it must be couched in terms of your own life and experience – no-one will be interested in a rehearsed evangelistic message if the message-bearer's own life and witness is not consistent with it!

Let's consider the basics of the message. God the Word, through whom everything was created, came from heaven's eternity to dwell amongst his creation. He died a perfect once-for-all sacrificial death for my sins, so that I might be forgiven. I died with him to my old life and rose with him to his new life in me. That makes me more special and loved than anyone on earth could ever make me. And there's so much more to the story.

Sharing our faith is not just about speaking to someone. The point at which you share the Good News with someone else may be after you have spent months praying for that person to be ready to receive it. Pray for opportunities to share. Pray for people to come to you rather going out to find them! Form relationships – the task of sharing good news is not like dropping an egg on the ground and moving on, leaving it to hatch itself.

If we struggle to share the Good News then perhaps we may need to hear it again, and to experience afresh its life-changing content. We are loved so much by Father God. His way of showing his love for us was to give us his Son, Jesus.

<https://youtu.be/1qzr7hITkxE>

How do you express your gratitude to God?

How do we express our gratitude to God in church?

How might we express this in the world?

Father God, show me someone who does not know your love and for whom I can pray, so that when the time comes I may be prepared to share my story of faith. Amen.

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December 15

Philippians 2.25-30

I think I ought to send my dear friend Epaphroditus back to you. He is a follower and a worker and a soldier of the Lord, just as I am. You sent him to look after me, but now he is eager to see you. He is worried, because you heard he was sick. In fact, he was very sick and almost died. But God was kind to him, and also to me, and he kept me from being burdened down with sorrow.

Now I am more eager than ever to send Epaphroditus back again. You will be glad to see him, and I won't have to worry any longer. Be sure to give him a cheerful welcome, just as people who serve the Lord deserve. He almost died working for Christ, and he risked his own life to do for me what you could not.

Who is this Epaphroditus? The congregation at Philippi had sent him all the way to Rome to care for Paul in prison. News and information travelled quickly in those days, often faster than the average person! Epaphroditus was not a well man, but he willingly gave his attention to Paul.

It seems that Paul was in need of some companionship. Paul was human, and had various problems and ailments. We can only surmise as to what the sorrow was that was close to overcoming Paul. His imprisonment might be a cause of sorrow, though not necessarily because of the direct pain of imprisonment – Paul was used to persecution. He could have heard about of the martyrdom or suffering of some of his fellow-Christians, people whom he knew well and loved, people to whom he himself may had brought the Good News. His sorrow may simply have been that he was unable to have fellowship with the many Christians whose lives and witness he cared deeply about.

Paul was a forward-looking person, ever thinking about where he might be going next. His later plans were thwarted by imprisonment and his death.

How aware are you of where there is suffering in the Church today?

How could your church or fellowship assist in this matter?

Father God, I can see the great love of the small church in Philippi in that they sent Epaphroditus to Paul. Help me know how far your Son came and the sacrifice he made to save me. Amen.

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December 16

Philippians 3.1-5

Finally, my dear friends, be glad that you belong to the Lord. It doesn't bother me to write the same things to you that I have written before. In fact, it is for your own good.

Watch out for those people who behave like dogs! They are evil and want to do more than just circumcise you. But we are the ones who are truly circumcised, because we worship by the power of God's Spirit and take pride in Christ Jesus.

We don't brag about what we have done, although I could. Others may brag about themselves, but I have more reason to brag than anyone else. I was circumcised when I was eight days old, and I am from the nation of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. I am a true Hebrew. As a Pharisee, I strictly obeyed the Law of Moses.

There's nothing more annoying in a sermon than a "finally" that isn't! Paul uses this word more than once in the letter.

Paul reminds his listeners that there are people about who would enforce certain traditions on the new church at Philippi, and all the other ones, too. Christianity had its birth in Judaism. The first Christians were Jews. They didn't think to put down their Jewish customs – as there was obviously no church nearby they continued to go to the Temple to pray – why shouldn't they? The Jewish scriptures we know as the Old Testament are indeed testament to God's plan to send his Messiah. They reveal the plans for a chosen nation into which the Messiah would be born. All over the Old Testament writings there are hints and even quite explicit prophecies that tell of the amazing plans of God.

For the first Christians this was their bedrock. Jesus was a Jew, and they thought little further than reaching out to the nation of Israel with the Good News of the Messiah the Jews had put to death. Peter was not a likely or suitable type to go out to the Gentile world.

Once non-Jewish people came to faith much of the tradition of Jewish faith had no relevance or immediacy. People born outside these traditions had not experienced what the Jews had experienced. Some evangelists still felt that the route to becoming a Christian was still via Judaism, hence the expectation that new male converts undergo the ritual of circumcision and follow the rules and traditions of Judaism. Paul clearly does not agree. He had heated arguments with Peter over this very same thing. Paul was more Jewish than Peter, and Paul was right.

Can you think of any action you do or words you say in church that are rooted more in tradition than in the expression of the Good News?

Could traditions cause a problem for new believers?

Father God, I am comfortable in what I know and I know what makes me comfortable. Shake me, shake my church, from our perches and make us a people who seek to reach out to all in our neighbourhood. Amen.

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December 17

Philippians 3.6-9

And I was so eager that I even made trouble for the church. I did everything the Law demands in order to please God. But Christ has shown me that what I once thought was valuable is worthless.

Nothing is as wonderful as knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. I have given up everything else and count it all as garbage. All I want is Christ and to know that I belong to him.

I could not make myself acceptable to God by obeying the Law of Moses. God accepted me simply because of my faith in Christ.

The trouble Paul refers to is of course his former persecution of the Church. Paul had stood to gain much respect and honour in his tradition. If Christ had not appeared to him near Damascus then Paul would have enjoyed a longer, more comfortable and more peaceful life as a good Pharisee.

However, Christ did appear to Saul on the road, and the few words he said to him were life-changing for Paul. When Saul came to the very frightened Ananias in Damascus, Ananias already knew that Saul would be called to suffer greatly for Christ Jesus (see Acts 9:13-16). Ananias may have chosen not to tell Saul that.

While this was all good, I wonder if we'd like to have been in Saul's position. What might cause you to seek to be excused? The suffering? We really don't like the idea of suffering. Saul did not choose suffering as an option, but as the inevitable outcome of living a life that glorifies God. Paul's motivation was never to suffer but to share the joy and privilege of knowing Jesus Christ his saviour. What was important before that encounter – fame, respect, wealth – were now of no worth.

How about the deprivation, the persecution, the imprisonments, the long journeys, shipwrecks, and all the rest Paul went through? Knowing Jesus as Lord was for Paul the ultimate gain, and no amount of persecution, suffering or loss would ever be able to wipe that away.

Paul then says something extraordinary, and this is possibly for many Christians who struggle with their faith the point they have missed or choose not to accept. God accepts us as we are. We do not have to perform rituals to display our obedience or punish ourselves because of our failures. Faith alone in Christ and his redeeming work is sufficient. Why pay for a free gift?

Nothing is as wonderful as ... how would you finish this sentence?

Can I really be accepted by God simply because I have faith in Christ?

<https://youtu.be/O4IqusP8Z8w>

Father God, nothing compares to you, nothing compares to your Son, Jesus, and nothing compares to the enabling and confirming power of your Holy Spirit. You give yourself freely to me. It will take eternity to express my gratitude. Amen.

December 18

Philippians 3.10-11

All I want is to know Christ and the power that raised him to life. I want to suffer and die as he did, so that somehow I also may be raised to life.

Paul repeats his words. People do that when they want to make a point. What, then, does it mean to know Christ?

Parents know their children, and children get to know their parents. Children do not need to know the historical facts about their parents in order to know them (though forgetting Mum's birthday is not recommended). A child's knowledge of his or her parents comes from living with them, discovering how much they love you and how they're there when you need them.

Would I accept a request to drive into Ipswich very late at night to take two people who'd been drinking (and couldn't drive) and a dog that had just swallowed three mince pies to the emergency vet? My daughter knows I would, and she also knows it's a damn cheek to ask on behalf of her friend staying with her, whose dog it was, but she did, and I drove over. Mince pies are not good for dogs. I'm now Superstar status for at least a short time in my daughter's eyes.

Any parent would, wouldn't they?

Parents are a pattern of Christ. He knows you better than any parent could. Jesus has saved you and will continue to save you. He will never give up on you. His love is inexhaustible.

Paul's next statement again reminds us of how close he is to Christ Jesus. He is willing and ready to undergo the same suffering that Jesus went through, including death, so that he can understand more fully what Jesus did for him. Paul knew that he was already alive in Christ through his resurrection, as we all are if we have died with Christ. The resurrection has already started, for those who live in Christ Jesus live his risen life.

What did you give up for your children?

What has Christ Jesus given up for you?

What did you give up for Christ?

Looking at every aspect of your life (character, desires, expectations, relationships, etc), how much does each one come under the authority of Christ?

Father God, in knowing Christ I am able to know you intimately as Father. Thank you that you willingly gave up your Son, that he was obedient to you in all things, so that I, who deserve nothing, may sit at your feet in the throne room of heaven. Amen.

December 19

Philippians 3:12-16

I have not yet reached my goal, and I am not perfect. But Christ has taken hold of me. So I keep on running and struggling to take hold of the prize. My friends, I don't feel that I have already arrived. But I forget what is behind, and I struggle for what is ahead.

I run toward the goal, so that I can win the prize of being called to heaven. This is the prize that God offers because of what Christ Jesus has done.

All of us who are mature should think in this same way. And if any of you think differently, God will make it clear to you. But we must keep going in the direction that we are now headed.

Paul's journey of faith is not yet at an end, but he knows that he is being daily renewed in Christ Jesus and being made holy in him. Jesus has Paul by the scruff of the neck.

When Paul says that he is not perfect he is describing a process, not a state. We are modest people by nature, and would hesitate to call ourselves perfect. However, I'm made in the image of God, as are you, so that's a good start. And God saw what he had made, and declared it good, so that's good, too. We are being daily renewed (see 2 Cor 4:16), and new is good. Paul knows, however, that perfection is a goal, and being made perfect is not a make-over but a work in progress. Perfection carries the meaning of completeness, finalised, done. Some people might argue that we cannot attain perfection, and they make that an excuse for not moving forward. However, it's not what we do, but what God does in us along the way that makes us perfect.

Paul knows this, and he describes the process of being perfected as striving toward the goal that he knows lies ahead of him. He encourages us all to join him in that struggle.

Looking behind, what are the things of the past that still hang on to you?

Looking at yourself now, where are you compared with where you were, say, a year ago?

Looking forward, what are you striving for?

Looking forward, where are you going?

Father God, I often feel like I'm limping along rather than running or lying down at the bottom of an incline rather than engaging with the climb. I know that the way ahead is not a park stroll, so I seek to be refreshed, changed and renewed daily. Amen.

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December 20

Philippians 4.4-6

Always be glad because of the Lord! I will say it again: Be glad. Always be gentle with others.

The Lord will soon be here.

Don't worry about anything, but pray about everything. With thankful hearts offer up your prayers and requests to God.

Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice. So says the Authorised Version. It's not a bad translation. This is the version, however, that translates verse 6 as: Be careful for nothing. That caused my younger self much confusion.

An exhortation to rejoice in the Lord feels like a good thing. It's easy to tell people to get up and rejoice, but the truth is so often that people do not want to get up and rejoice. The words are not what they can really identify with, and repeated exhortations to rejoice can leave people thinking that their Christian life and witness is a bit thin because they are not rejoicing. Let me, if you have felt that way, introduce you to the book of Psalms.

The Lord will soon be here – it seems that Paul may have been expecting the imminent return of Christ. We are still expecting that return. Perhaps Paul in his zeal was expressing more the need to live as though Christ were about to return imminently, and that is true today as it was then. Only Father God knows about dates and times – whatever the time of Christ's return we are expected to be ready, ever alert, ever watchful and ever prayerful. Watch and pray.

Live as though Christ is about to return. When he returns will he find us ready? (see Luke 18.1-8 – the sting in the tail of the parable). What about those we love? How will we ensure that those whose lives cross ours will also be taken up with Christ? How much do we care about their eternities? Now is the time to pray for those who have not yet come to faith.

What causes you to rejoice?

How should I respond when told to rejoice and I don't feel like it?

How can I be sure I'm ready for Christ's return?

Who is coming with me?

Father God, there are daily things I worry about that I should hand over to you, but I confess that my faith in your ability to deal with them is lacking. Forgive my pride. Set my mind on eternal things, to the return of Lord Jesus and the eternal destiny of the people of my neighbourhood. Amen.

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December 21

Philippians 4.7-9

Then, because you belong to Christ Jesus, God will bless you with peace that no one can completely understand. And this peace will control the way you think and feel.

Finally, my friends, keep your minds on whatever is true, pure, right, holy, friendly, and proper. Don't ever stop thinking about what is truly worthwhile and worthy of praise. You know the teachings I gave you, and you know what you heard me say and saw me do.

So follow my example. And God, who gives peace, will be with you.

There is a peace that the world cannot give. This peace brings assurance and confidence as well as calmness. It is the peace of knowing that God will work his purposes out and that there will be no more evil, no more pain, no more suffering, only rejoicing and eternal praise of the Lamb of God.

At the Falklands Memorial Service many years back, Archbishop Robert Runcie preached on the awfulness of war rather than the glory of victory. He was roundly criticised by politicians eager to portray the war as a righteous act. I cast no judgements on the content or the response, but even after war there seems to be a lack of peace. Was Archbishop Runcie motivated by truth, purity, righteousness, holiness, amity and propriety when he preached that sermon, and were those who criticised equally motivated?

Our dealings with the world will be fraught. When we offer Jesus to a fallen world, we cannot guarantee that people will accept, or that they might not take issue with us. The peace that we display, God's peace resident and abiding in our lives, revealed by our words and actions, demonstrated by our refusal to be involved in spitefulness, greed and selfish activities, is all we have to reach out with to those mired in the world of sin.

Where can my little light shine?

Do I keep my little light under cover?

Why is Jesus better than Mindfulness or any New Age practice?

Father God, I seek the peace of Jesus, not so that I become detached from the world in a holy haze, but so that I may engage in it with You beside me. Amen.

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December 22

Philippians 4.10-13

The Lord has made me very grateful that at last you have thought about me once again. Actually, you were thinking about me all along, but you didn't have any chance to show it.

I am not complaining about having too little. I have learned to be satisfied with whatever I have. I know what it is to be poor or to have plenty, and I have lived under all kinds of conditions. I know what it means to be full or to be hungry, to have too much or too little.

Christ gives me the strength to face anything.

Paul turns to the subject of the gifts he has received from people in supporting his ministry and to help him in prison. The church at Philippi had sent gifts to Paul (see tomorrow's extract) and Paul expresses his thanks. You might wonder from the way he words it if Paul had been long expecting something.

It would be encouraging to us if Paul had said that Christ had taken care of all his needs. But Paul does not quite say that. He says that he is able to manage on what he has, and this may at times have been insufficient to his needs. In times of need we don't necessarily get a fat cheque from God (contrary to what a number of prosperity gospel tele-evangelists would have us believe) and, as Paul discovered when he put his physical ailment, that "thorn in the flesh" as he described it, before God for healing, the response could be, "My grace is sufficient for you."

Paul's experiences of hunger did not make him more able to withstand hunger. His times of imprisonment did not in themselves make him tougher to withstand it. This is not what God intends. In times of hardship, increasingly more likely to come to us as we give ourselves to Christ and his call on our lives, we may surely rely on him not necessarily to take away the pain (though miracles can and do happen), but to sustain us through his gracious presence within us.

When did you last have to lean upon the grace of God?

How does Jesus walk with you in your fears and your sorrows?

Father God, in Jesus you have given me the glorious riches of your inheritance and the certain hope of glory. You may take me to places where the going is hard, but I trust, as Paul did, that your grace will see me through it all. Amen.

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December 23

Philippians 4.14-18

It was good of you to help me when I was having such a hard time. My friends at Philippi, you remember what it was like when I started preaching the good news in Macedonia. After I left there, you were the only church that became my partner by giving blessings and by receiving them in return.

Even when I was in Thessalonica, you helped me more than once. I am not trying to get something from you, but I want you to receive the blessings that come from giving. I have been paid back everything, and with interest.

I am completely satisfied with the gifts that you had Epaphroditus bring me. They are like a sweet-smelling offering or like the right kind of sacrifice that pleases God.

Philippi is in Macedonia. Paul went on from there to Thessalonica – what happened to him there is worth a read – see Acts 17:1-9, and the follow-up in verses 10-16. After reading the passages you will see why Paul (and Silas) needed some support.

The new converts at Philippi had not known Paul for long, as we have already heard. Yet they were ready to give to support Paul. Lydia may have been a wealthy woman, but that doesn't mean that she was the one who subbed Paul. The few Jews who were living in Philippi may have had some sort of business. The jailer and his household (read all about it in Acts 16!) may not have been the wealthiest of people.

Despite all this they gave freely to support Paul, even though he had left them. They gave for one simple reason – they were grateful to God for the blessings they had received through Paul. Paul had pointed them to the gift of salvation and eternal life in Jesus. There is no greater love than that which Father God showered on us when he sent his Son to this world. There is no greater gift than that which Jesus gave us when he gave his own life to save us from sin and to bring us to eternal life.

Some churches struggle to survive financially – how many people does a church need for it to support itself financially? It's a question of grace rather than money. Use the questions below to think about the financial response you might make to God for what he's done for you.

Could the parable of the talents be true today?

How do I measure how good God has been to me? Have I allowed myself to be in a position where God can be good to me?

How do I measure the amount I give to God (my church and any other Christian organisation) against the amount that comes in each month? Which way round should the calculation be?

How much am I prepared to invest in work that brings the Gospel message to my neighbourhood? To the unchurched? To young people? To the world?

What value do I place on grace?

If you need to take this further then please talk with other church members and leaders.

Father God, I have a sticky wallet/purse. Show me why and how I can release its contents for your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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December 24

Philippians 4.19-20

I pray that God will take care of all your needs with the wonderful blessings that come from Christ Jesus!

May God our Father be praised forever and ever. Amen.

Today will be quite busy, so...

Think about the money you've spent on others (and on luxuries) this season, and why you do it. Consider your motives and look at the relationships you have with people that cause you to be generous.

Compare with the relationships that come from faith.

Have a godly Christmas.

With Blessings,

Paul