

On the Letter to the Philippians (1)

St Paul's Letter to the Philippians opens with some of the most remarkable words in the entire Bible:

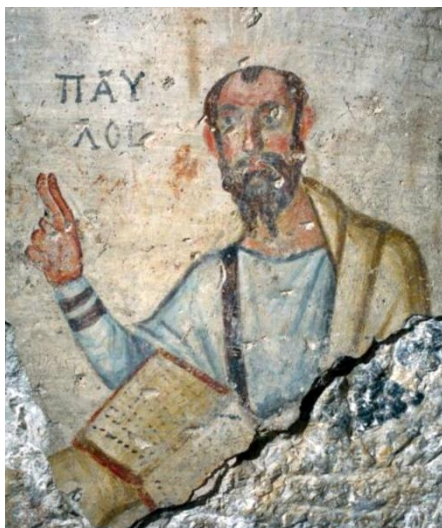
Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the bishops and the deacons:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. Philippians 1.1-11

There is a tenderness and intimacy in the way St Paul describes his friends in Philippi which is truly extraordinary – and unlike anything in any of his letters to other churches. There are some echoes here of the exquisite words which open the second of the Apostle's letters to the Church in



Corinth, for example – a profound exposition of the way in which all of our experience and all of our meaning is held together and made fruitful within the compassion of Jesus Christ – but these words to the Christians at Philippi are marked by a much more strongly *personal* touch, and real and unmistakeable warmth of heart: *'I long for all of you with the compassion of Jesus Christ'*. This is a lot more than a merely conventional greeting, but an expression of genuine feeling and affection. It

is possible to translate the Greek – Paul’s words in his own language – not only in terms of these people *holding each other in their hearts*, but also of expressing a depth of feeling which comes from the very ‘*innards*’ of Christ: it is something not only intimate, but *visceral*.

It is worth remembering just who these Philippian Christians really are. Of all the Churches to whom Paul writes, that in Philippi is probably the poorest, the most modest. We can tell from the details he gives about individual members of the Church there that some of them are slaves, and most are from rather *lowly* backgrounds (in marked contrast with the urbane and self-assured movers and shakers in the Church in Corinth, for example). We can deduce that – then just as now – sometimes it is among the poorest and lowliest that we shall discover the greatest kindness and warmth of heart. For this reason, the Apostle’s comments begin, not with challenge or complaint (although this is a Church which does need some direction as it faces conflicts and difficulties, as we shall come to see), but with an effusive spirit of *encouragement* and *affirmation*.

Paul can see that there has begun a remarkable work of grace within these rather ordinary people – people on whom many others might *look down*. This conversion to the values of the Gospel, especially to the expression of the *love of Christ*, might not yet be complete: but we can see that it has begun and it *continues* – it is tangible and real. The Apostle prays that these friends of his will recognise this process which has taken root within them, and will nurture it into ever greater fruitfulness. He does not worry that it is not yet finished, because he is confident that it will be so ‘*by the day of Jesus Christ*’. That is to say, we remain a work in progress until we are made complete when we finally behold Jesus Christ face to face in his glory. Against this comparison, we can measure the extent of God’s work within our own selves.

For Paul himself, the whole meaning of life is to be *conformed to the pattern of Jesus Christ*, to be ‘*in Christ*’. In some ways he would rather pass through death to be where Christ is – in the glory of God – but he knows the importance of ‘remaining in the flesh’ for the benefit of his fellow-Christians.

‘My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your

progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. Philippians 1.23-26

Here is the first hint of a focus which will come to fill the entire letter, a sense of *self-offering* for the good of those who depend upon us. This will emerge powerfully in the next chapter of the letter; but already Paul has sown a seed in our minds and hearts, that to follow Christ – to live lives which are conformed to the pattern of Christ – is to be open to offering ourselves for each other just as Jesus Christ has offered himself for us. To be precise, Paul understands our self-offering as the means by which we become *adapted to Jesus Christ* (rather than thinking that our own self-offering in some way equates to that of Jesus Christ): always it is what *Jesus Christ* says and does which is where our own self-understanding and identity come into focus. Jesus Christ is our *point of reference*, and we are most truly ourselves when it is *his reflection* which others can see in us.

Hence it matters to a high degree that we live lives of goodness and integrity – that we become ‘pure and blameless’, particularly in the face of trials of different kinds:

Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them, this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God’s doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well – since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have. Philippians 1.27-30

It is in the way we face the time of testing that we shall disclose our true character, and show the extent to which our adherence to the pattern of Christ has been genuine and complete. It is perhaps because the Philippian Christians have – most of them – lived lives of some severity and challenge, that Paul finds in them, particularly, a reflection of the fruitfulness of this process of conversion and conformity to Christ. They have *already* been tested more than their sisters and brothers in faith in some of the cosier Churches: but that testing has had tangible benefit for them. May it be the same also for you and for me.

The image of St Paul comes from a grotto in Ephesus, and dates from the 5th.