

On the Letter to the Philippians (3)

As in all of the writings of the Apostle Paul, the Letter to the Philippians contains a mixture of *sophisticated doctrinal reasoning* – most obviously in the credal poem near the start of Chapter 2 which describes Jesus' Christ's *self-emptying* and *glorification* by God the Father – and consideration of the *practical implications* of our faith in Jesus Christ. In this instance, Paul is absolutely direct, and mentions individual people by name:

My brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. Philippians 4.1-3



We have all experienced what it is to be part of a church where people are at loggerheads with each other, and where it is all too easy for us to be sucked into cliques which become antagonistic against each other: this is a particular risk in small and modest churches, maybe in those we might think of as *struggling* churches, as that in Philippi itself was too. The apostle is firm but always gracious to and about these two women whom he names, Euodia and Syntyche: he does not *blame* them, even though he sees that it is essential for something to *change* in the way they relate to each other. Instead, he commends *both* of them for the manifest good which each of them has helped him achieve in and through this church. But instead of taking sides, or rolling our eyes and turning away, we are to *help these women*. Where there is potential conflict between us, says the Apostle, we should always seek to *help* each other. Notice, in particular, that Paul equates this with being 'of

the same mind in the Lord' – a deliberate echo of the words which he used to introduce the credal hymn in Chapter 2:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

Think, and relate to each other, in the same way that *Jesus Christ* thinks and relates – with a willingness to set personal gain on one side, to empty ourselves for the sake of each other, to allow ourselves to be 'poured out' (cf Philippians 2.17, where Paul describes the feeling this outlook has in his own experience of self-offering). For us to echo the stance of Jesus Christ is to allow for the reconciliation by which those among us who have been conflicted may yet be brought back into a constructive embrace – and the hope of this possibility *never ceases* for us.

Consequently, the Apostle Paul is able to see and experience self-offering and self-emptying for each other's sake not so much as a kind of *self-sacrifice* – let alone one which is wracked by *pain*: rather, it is a source of *hope* and of *joy* – themselves a reflection of the process by which Jesus is glorified in measure of his self-emptying, and honoured in measure of the degree to which he has been poured out for us:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Philippians 4.4-9

This, too, is as clear a *practical summary* of the nature of Christian life as the poetry of Chapter 2 is a *doctrinal exposition* of the Christian faith. The two go together. We *practise* what we *preach*.

Hope and joy, of course, are not quite the same as *optimism* and *happiness*. We can feel optimistic about things when everything is going smoothly; we can feel happy when everything is marked by fluency and ease. They are the emotions of those whom we might call our *fair-weather*

friends. But what when the going becomes a bit more challenging, or things begin to go wrong, or we find that the building of the New Jerusalem is going to take longer than the time we had thought we would allot it? There is in both hope and joy a kind of resilience which is not dependent on the outcome: it is possible to remain hopeful even while the struggle continues; it is possible to be filled with joy even when our experience is mixed with uncertainty and pain. They are grounded in the longer and wider perspective of the working of the *Providence of God*. So it is that at the end of the Letter to the Philippians (there are only a dozen or so more verses after the texts copied here), the Apostle commends to us ‘the peace of God which surpasses all understanding’ – that grounding in the heart of God from which nothing can shake us and in which we find security in the face of everything else which life may throw at us. It is the peace on the basis of which Jesus Christ felt able to offer himself in the first place; it is the peace of God in which his self-offering is recognised and honoured and glorified; it is the peace in which we ourselves can be at peace, *come what may*.

It is why the *exchange of peace* is one of the most important of our liturgical gestures of them all. By it we orient ourselves towards the heart of God, from whom all hope ultimately comes. Through it we strengthen and confirm the basis of our relationships with each other before God. In it, at the profoundest level, we practise what we preach – we *bring it into effect*. It is not a mere form of words, but the heartfelt basis from which we align ourselves with the work of Christ, in whom all things may yet be made new. It is why the Apostle’s letter *began* with the expression of peace (Philippians 1.2); it is why it *ends* with the expression of peace, here in these words which we use as the culmination of the Liturgy as we receive the pledge of God’s blessing. It is in this spirit that the Apostle sends us all back out into the world, that *all* of our relationships may be renewed and conformed to the Peace of God – indeed that we shall be *peace-bearers* and *peace-makers* just as Jesus himself had commended (cf Matthew 5.9). May it be so. Amen.

Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The friends who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor’s household. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Philippians 4.21-23

The image shows the greeting between Mary and Elizabeth, itself a model of the relations commended between us (cf Luke 1.39-45).