

Partners in the gospel

Philippians 1:1-11

What do you find your deepest joy in?

People find joy pretty elusive, really. They seek it. They *think* they find it - and then it slips away, or fades away. None of the things that they chase, and often feel so *natural* to pursue, quite live up to the promise of the joy they're after. Maybe it's because it takes something supernatural for humans to find joy.

We're going to go through the letter to the Philippian Church over the next couple of months. And there's lots about that church that makes it really relevant for our church to learn from. Philippi, in Northern Greece, was the first place where the gospel - the good news of Jesus - came to Europe. We read about that in Acts 16, when God closed some doors for Paul and moved him on to arrive in Philippi and tell people about Jesus.

This small church was living in a country and a continent without knowledge or interest in Jesus. Philippi was a Roman colony - it was like an outpost of Rome itself. It looked like Rome. Physically, culturally, its whole environment was saturated with the pursuit of gratifying sensual desires - greed, lust, materialism, and a be-like-the-state-and-culture-tell-you-to-be atmosphere.

It was a church on the margins. And make no mistake, that's where we are today. There's a lot of talk about us living in a post-Christendom era - we're no longer a Christian country where the Church is a big institution. We're not at the centre of society anymore. We're at the margins.

So be encouraged. Because that's where the early church was. That's where the church in Philippi was - in a city that looked a lot like Rome, they were a small and distinct community of people who looked a lot like the Kingdom of God. And that was noticeably *different* and *distinct* from the world around them.

If you feel really *different* from everyone around you because you're a Christian - because of the beliefs you have that others think outdated or even immoral; because of the lifestyle you live that seems so utterly strange and unusual, be encouraged - this is what being a people on the margins of society is like. And it's there, in the margins, that the church grew 2000 years ago. And it's here, in the margins, that the church in Europe will grow again.

It's easy, if you recognise that you're in the margins, to feel like a victim. And for many who have lived life in the margins, that's truly what it's been like. But what's really striking is that there's no victim mentality in this letter.

Paul writes this letter to the church from *prison*, as we'll see in later chapters - but far from feeling sorry for himself and his church, he's full of *joy!* The words joy or rejoice go off like fireworks right through this letter! And far from fighting for his rights or calling the Philippian church to stand up for theirs in the margins, he'll write about laying down our rights in the light and for the sake of Jesus.

So what's Paul's answer on where to find joy? It's this: *Focus on Jesus Christ.* Philippians is known for having the word 'joy' in it lots - about 15 times. But it has 'Jesus Christ' in it more than twice as much. 40 times.

Paul finds a deep, overflowing joy even in *prison* because he is focused *more than anything else* on Jesus. He's always thinking and speaking of Him. And he writes to this Philippian church, who like us, are about ten years old when they get this letter, about their joy overflowing in Christ Jesus too. He wants to point them to Jesus, all the time, in everything he writes here.

The joy that knowing Jesus brings is unsurpassable. It rescues people. It sustains people. It redefines people. It cannot be shaken, broken, taken or emptied as long as the people of Jesus keep focusing their attention on Him.

So Paul begins the letter as he means to go on. v.1, 'Paul and Timothy, *servants of Christ Jesus...*' That's what Paul thinks of as how he and his apprentice Timothy are defined. That's who they are - it's all centred on knowing and serving Jesus as King.

v.2, 'To all the *saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi*, together with the overseers and deacons...' - it's not just the leaders in the Philippian church, but *all* of them, who are called 'saints in Christ Jesus.' That doesn't mean impressive pious miracle workers. It just means those 'called out, set apart, to belong to God through Jesus.' That's who they are - their identity is in belonging to Jesus.

v.3, 'Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ' - the beautiful things that Christians know - grace, that total acceptance and welcome of us warts and all despite the truth of who we are; and peace, that foundational stillness in our hearts through calm and through battering storm - we get that all from *Jesus*.

Even in his *greeting*, Paul wants to point us to Jesus three times. He thinks of and speaks of nothing more than he thinks of and speaks of Jesus.

What do you think of and speak of more than Jesus? What do you find happens in the times when you think and speak of Him more?

The church at Philippi started when a spiritually seeking rich Asian businesswoman, a spiritually dark poor abused slave girl, and a spiritually completely unaware ordinary prison guard heard good news about Jesus from Paul and his pals. And they gathered together at the businesswoman's house to start a new life together as church. You can read their stories in Acts 16.

Ten years on, there's new names in the letter that Paul writes to them. The church has been growing as they've joined in with the good news mission Paul has.

And that's another thing that brings Paul deep joy. It's what he calls in v.5 their, '...partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.' It's not in the NIV translation, but he uses the word 'partners' again in v.7 - he calls this church his 'partners in God's grace.' And their partnership in these things fills Paul with joy.

The Greek word is *koinonia*. That often gets translated as 'fellowship.' But when people hear the word 'fellowship,' they usually think of 'Christians having tea or coffee, and a biscuit and a blether.' You hear people talk about 'a time of fellowship after the service' or 'we had a great time of fellowship' when some Christian friends hang out.

But that's pretty far removed from what *koinonia* - 'partnership' - really means. It was the word used for people entering into committed business partnerships together. Where they invested themselves into something together, each individual sacrificing for the thing they were bound together to pursue. *That's* what brings Paul joy about the Philippian church. And actually, *that's* what brings me joy about our church.

Koinonia means being *friends together on mission*. Paul thanks God for his experience of having deep friendships invested in sharing the gospel with others. In these gospel partnerships, there is warmth shared and there is work shared. Look at the language Paul uses towards this church he loves

so dearly. v.4, 'I pray for you with joy,' ; v.7, 'I have you in my heart,' ; v.8, 'I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.'

Paul speaks of his emotions towards his church friends. He prays for them with these emotions. He loves them, and he tells them so, and he tells God so. He has that feeling that you get in your gut, in your heart, in your soul, that deeply, deeply treasures people - and he has it about this church, these 'partners in the gospel.'

Guys, we are more to each other than people living parallel lives and sharing a hall on a Sunday. You are more to me than that. You are more to each other than that, I see that, I know that. Are we not a family who yearn for one another? Who miss each other when we're apart? Friends who delight to be in each other's company? People who feel the warmth and love and affection of Christ towards one another?

I think God's Word here tells us to say so! To tell each other, show each other, however it is you express it - that we love and value each other richly and deeply. To pray to God with the same emotion about these friends you journey with.

More than warmth shared, though, being partners in the gospel means work shared. Sacrificing and investing together for the work of making the good news of Jesus known.

Gilbert Lennox points out about this: 'When you're partners, you partner in *something*. You don't 'partner in partnership.' That doesn't mean anything.' You partner in a business venture, or a marriage, or in ownership of property, or a project. It often involves money, actually - putting our money where our mouths and our mission are. Paul writes to the ten year old church in Philippi to thank them for continuing to be 'partners in the *gospel*.'

During the letter, we discover that the church had sent Paul a financial gift to provide for him during his imprisonment. That mattered, because Paul wouldn't have been provided for by the state. The way Paul sees it, that's enabling him in his gospel ministry - because it's there in the prison that he's got the chance to make Jesus known to others! More on that next week though...

As we read through the letter, we find that this church has been doing all they can to support and partner with Paul from day one, as v.5 tells us. Paul especially loves this church because they have rolled up sleeves and given

money and shared in mission together the whole time that they've known each other.

I deeply love our church. I don't pray for you nearly as much as I should, and that's something God's teaching me through this passage today. But I feel huge affection for you, my friends and co-workers in making the gospel known. You are not passengers, you are not consumers or members 'paying for a service' - you are dear friends, and we've journeyed together for years, contending for and sharing the gospel together.

I've shared with you in previous weeks that I believe God is saying 'I want my people to listen to me; I want them to know who they are.' Well, here's the starting point in Philippians. You are partners in the gospel. Friends together in a shared mission to bring good news about Jesus to this community.

I think this is why our unity as a church is strong, and how it will get stronger as we understand ourselves this way more and more. We have a culture of mutual encouragement as we look outward together rather than of private criticism looking inward as individuals.

Tony Merida and Francis Chan write this: 'You can start complaining about all sorts of things when you lose sight of the mission. But it's amazing how little you will complain about things inside the church when you're reaching out to lost people.'

How have you seen the love of Christ grow between us as we've partnered in mission?

Alongside the strong theme of 'joy,' and the absolutely dominant theme of 'Jesus Christ,' the theme of 'work' is shot through Philippians too. Not only us being friends and co-workers together in the gospel, but God's work in us. Paul rejoices in the gospel work the Philippians share with him in v.5, 'being confident of this,' (v.6), '...that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.'

God works too. God works in us. And what He starts, He finishes. Paul says, 'I'm *confident* that what God has begun in you, He will bring to completion.' There's a long haul view there - the day of Christ Jesus. By the end of your life or the end of this world - God will finish what He began in you. When Paul says 'He who began a good work in you,' the 'you' is plural. He's addressing all of this church, together.

Undoubtedly he means that God is doing a work in each individual person in that church. But more than that, he's saying that God is doing a work in *them* - together, that team, that family, that gospel partnership on the margins of a European city.

God is doing a work in *us*, isn't He? We sense that as a church, don't we? We've heard from Him that it's a season of spring for us; things are taking root and growing and we're to be encouraged by that. v.6 encourages us to believe that as well as spring, summer's coming too - God will bring to full bloom over time what He has begun in us as a church. Our church is not destined to be a half-finished project.

And He's told us to get ready. Again, as a few of us gathered for prayer on Friday morning, He reminded us that He wants us, His people, to get ready. To grow. To increase. To believe that it's God who works in us to do that.

Paul teaches us to shape our prayers around this. What do you pray for? Is it for things, or is it for people? Is it for your stuff, or is it seeking first the Kingdom of God, believing all these other things will be added unto you? Is it with entitlement or with gratitude? Paul teaches us that to pray 'Your Kingdom Come' involves praying for *people* - especially for *God's* people - to grow in Christlikeness.

Paul always starts his prayers with thanks - and not for things, but for God's people. We've seen him thank God in vv.3-6 for his Philippian gospel partners, and for what God is doing in their lives. When you pray, do you pray for us? Your church? And do you start that prayer with thanks for us and what God is doing in us? God's Word is teaching us to pray like that from now on.

In v.6, Paul's confident that God's going to keep working in his gospel partners 'until the day of Christ Jesus.' And in vv.9-11, he prays for the things that God will grow in them 'until the day of Christ Jesus.' Do you see what God's telling us here? He says, 'Invite me to work in you, and be confident that I will - right to completion.'

Paul prays that this church family of his will have a 'love that abounds in knowledge and depth of insight.' Our love for God, for one another, and for the world around us flows from the head as well as the heart. It's as we know God more deeply, know His Word more deeply, know His will more deeply, that we find all these loves grow.

When you cease pursuing God, your heart grows cold pretty quickly. When you pursue knowing God, listening to him in Word and Spirit, the mind fills with His presence and truth, and the heart begins to burst again for Him, His family, and His lost world.

And Paul prays this *in order that* they may be able to ‘discern what is best.’ When I read that, it popped out; I felt God’s Spirit tell me, ‘This is for you, this is for St Columba church.’ That we would increase in a knowing love, so that we can discern what is best - make the right call about what we go after.

When you become a follower of Jesus, you learn to put aside what is sin for what is true life; to give up what is bad for what is good. But we’re to grow into more than that. We’re to grow into knowing what good things to give up, to go after what is *best*.

We’re all busy people, all too conscious of how finite is our time, our money, our health, our emotional energy. In a thousand little decisions in the week, and in the big decisions we face in each season of life, God wants what is *best* for us. He’s working that in us, through to completion. And for our part, we’re called to pray that for one another. So let’s do that now.

Prayer - God, deepen our knowledge of you and your will, that we might choose not what is good, but what is best.

When we’re laying down what is bad, and what is good, to go after what God shows us is *best*, there’s another purpose to that - it’s *in order that* we might be pure and blameless. Pure here means transparent. That we are living lives where what you see is what you get. Where what is going on inside is consistent with the good, the best, that is going on outside.

And blameless here has the sense of causing nobody any offence. The good news about Jesus we partner in will always cause offence, as Paul writes elsewhere. We can’t and shouldn’t avoid that. But our life and behaviour is not to offend and hurt and tear others down. And as we grow in knowing love, pursuing what is best, this kind of blamelessness grows too.

All of that is *in order that* we would be ‘filled with the fruit of the righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ.’ ‘Righteousness,’ that is, being called ‘right in the eyes of God,’ is a gift that God gives us in Jesus Christ. We don’t have it, we can’t do it ourselves. So it’s given to us; it was given as we were forgiven at the cross.

But the righteousness described here is to do with the right living that follows from knowing and growing in Jesus. That what would naturally drip from our lives will be the fruit of prayer and justice and reconciliation and bold good news sharing and peace making and generosity and counter-cultural holiness.

And all of that has yet one more purpose to it - and it's the greatest of purposes. It's the glory of God. All of this work that God does in us, for which we pray and in which we can be confident He's going to keep going until it's actually completed in us - it's all for His glory. That He might be famous and loved and treasured and praised in this place.

That this community, this city, this world might know - God is real, He is beautiful, wonderful, majestic, delightful and awesome beyond understanding. Friends, partners, family - let's pray for one another the things Paul teaches us, *so that* we'll see the glory and praise of God in Inverness and Loch Ness!