

The Apostle Paul writing to the church in Philippi said: *“Therefore, my brothers and sisters, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.*

Paul, wrote this incredible letter to the Philippians when he was in a Roman prison held in chains and under armed guard. He was shortly to be put on trial for his faith, and Paul knew the death penalty was a real possibility. So, unsurprisingly, Paul chose to write to *his* loved ones, the Christians in Philippi, a church that Paul himself had founded some years previously during his second missionary journey. In verse 1 of today’s chapter he calls the Philippians his *“brothers & sisters”*, and his *“dear friends”*. Paul tells them that he *“loves them and longs for them”*. They are his *“joy”* and his *“crown”*.

In this letter we are reading Paul’s last words to his loved one. Words he most wanted them to hear. Words they should treasure, should they never see him again. What were the words he wanted to leave them with? Firstly, he wants people *to be joyful* (v.4) *to be gentle* (v.5) *to be prayerful* (v.6-7) and finally, *to be thoughtful* (v.8-9).

Paul tells us to be joyful *in the Lord*. He wants us to have a deep and lasting joy that is based on our relationship with Christ. A joy that is more profound, more resilient than any earthly experience can offer. An unshakeable joy based upon everything Jesus has achieved for us. A joy that we can express in prayer, in praise and in grateful obedience to our Saviour.

So let us be reminded about what Christ has accomplished for us by his death and resurrection. Confirming what is on offer to anyone who puts their faith in the Lord Jesus. Firstly, Christians can rejoice because our sins are forgiven. Our guilt was taken away at the Cross and we are members of God’s forgiven people. Christians can also be joyful because God is at work in our lives today. Through every trial we face in our lives, and there are plenty, especially now as we know. God is with us by his Spirit, making us ever more like his Son. Christ’s resurrection means that death is not the end for us or a doorway to divine judgment. Rather, death is merely the threshold to everlasting life. Everlasting life in a world without disease and decay. A world where Jesus is undisputed king.

To rejoice in the Lord is not to put our head in the sand or deny the harsh realities of life. It is to know that whatever happens we are loved, we are saved and we have a glorious future ahead. A future that is ‘over’ and ‘above’ our present circumstances, held secure in Heaven for us. So let us rejoice!

In verse 5 Paul wants his readers to be known for their gentleness. To be gentle is not to be a weakling, but someone who is humble, kind and selfless. Throughout the letter to the Philippians we have seen Paul commend these qualities. Above all, in

that great passage of Philippians chapter 2, Paul has held up for us Christ as the supreme example of humility and selflessness. There was no aggression or assertiveness in Christ's decision to come to earth as our Saviour. And he was being gentle and gracious, not selfish, when he allowed himself to be nailed to a cross for our salvation.

Paul adds another reason for gentleness in verse 5. We should be gentle and humble because "*the Lord is near*". We live every day in the presence of God. It is wrong of us to promote ourselves and our own agendas when we live our lives under the gaze of almighty God. So be gentle.

If joy and gentleness should be features of our Christian lives, then prayerfulness is a third. Because in verse 6 Paul writes: "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*" God knows the countless temptations, trials and tests that life can throw at us. Things that so easily make us worried and anxious. Problems with our health or our family or our livelihood that could so easily cause us stress. And that's even before we open a newspaper or turn on the TV news.

But God wants us to know that he can help us handle all of our problems and concerns, if only we let him. As the Bible says in 1 Peter 5 v 7: "*Cast all your anxiety on God, because he cares for you*" And there is a great promise in verse 7 of our passage today that if we do commit all our anxieties to God in prayer he will give us inner peace, contentment and assurance in return. If we turn to him in prayer, the same Jesus who could calm a storm on Lake Galilee can certainly calm our troubled hearts too. God will give us his peace, a peace "*which transcends all understanding*".

So we should practice thanking him for all he has given us and promised us. No special words are required. We can say what we really feel. And if we do this, God will calm our hearts and clear our minds. So let's be prayerful!

Fourthly and finally, Paul wants us to be *thoughtful*. In verses 8 and 9 of today's passage he encourages us to think about "*whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable...excellent or praiseworthy*". That is a pretty comprehensive list! It seems to cover everything that is good in the areas of belief, behaviour and beauty. It means learning and reflecting on everything true about God, about ourselves and about the world he has made. In belief are we listening to the voice Jesus, of Paul and others in the Bible who teach us about the character of God, the nature of humanity and the work of Christ? In the area of behaviour, do we seek to imitate and applaud those individuals both in Scripture and in society today who exhibit godliness, kindness, generosity and all the other fruit of the Spirit? Above all, do we look to Christ as our role model and example for living?

And in the area of beauty, do we appreciate and delight in all that God has made.

Why are we to think about such good things? What is wrong with filling our minds with impurity and untruth? The reason is that if we are to remain strong in faith, our thoughts matter. If our thoughts go astray, our beliefs and our behaviour will soon follow.

Someone once said: "Sow a thought and you reap an action. Sow an action and you reap a habit. Sow a habit and you reap a character. Sow a character and you reap a destiny." Jesus himself said that every murder has its origin in an angry thought, and every act of adultery begins with a lustful look. If we guard what goes on in our minds, then godly behaviour will follow.

So in today's passage and elsewhere Paul offers us some practical tips for guarding our minds:

Most importantly, we must read God's Word frequently, ideally every day. In 2 Timothy 3:15-16, Paul tells us that the Bible can make us "*wise for salvation*" and equip us "*for every good work*", so we would do well to meditate on its teaching. As well as reading the Bible, we should learn from those able to explain and apply what the Bible says. This is what Paul is driving at in verse 9, when he writes "*whatever you have learned or received from me, put it into practice*". Finally, we must be careful with what we watch on TV, what we look at on the internet, and what things we read. Are we filling our minds with things that are wholesome, edifying and true, or are we allowing our thoughts to be shaped by secular values, on-screen violence or other immorality? Are we making good use of the off button on our remote control, or am we letting unwholesome TV deprive us of quality time with friends, family or with God? In other words, be thoughtful!

This is all reflected of course in the parable Jesus told in our gospel reading. Jesus wants us to ensure that we don't let anything prevent us from accepting God's invitation and keeping our promise. All we need to do is respond to such generous love by making God a priority in our lives, whatever our background, whatever clothes we wear.

Amen