

## Being the church

We come this morning to the last chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians – written to the church in Philippi – his friends in Philippi – from prison in Rome.

The reading opened with “Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!” The “therefore” looks back to chapter three, where he wrote about running a race, telling us about how he runs this race by pressing on to the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. The chapter ends with him saying “Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!”

He gives us a very mixed metaphor – ‘run the race’ and ‘stand firm’. I’ve never been much of an athlete, but even I know that you can’t win a race by standing still.

But what Paul describes, I think, matches our experience of living as Christians: Life is in many ways a race – and an obstacle race at that. As we progress through life, we experience challenges and setbacks – and successes and joys.

The Uniting Church Basis of Union gives us this description: “The Church lives between the time of Christ’s death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which Christ will bring; the Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; [...] On the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way.”

In this race of life, we have to keep our focus on the finish line – on Jesus. We have to ‘stand firm’ or ‘hold fast’ to that - despite whatever obstacles we might face, and despite whatever distractions we encounter.

Paul goes on to address an obstacle the Philippians were facing: “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.” (4:2)

This harks back to what he wrote in chapter two – “Do everything without grumbling or arguing” (2:14) Clearly, there was some issue between Euodia and Syntyche, and clearly it was serious enough to be raised with Paul, and for Paul to respond.

We don’t know the details, but I can imagine that things had escalated, and people in the church were siding with one or the other. And so the Philippian leaders or elders had written to Paul wanting him to adjudicate the dispute.

Paul doesn’t adjudicate though, instead he urges the women ‘to be of the same mind’ – focus on what’s important – focus on Jesus. And he calls on the Philippians to help them both.

I think it's fair to say that our society today is increasingly divided – or maybe it's just that the divisions are increasingly visible – or maybe it's just become more acceptable or commonplace to make divisions known.

Euodia and Syntyche were high profile members of the church. They had contended at Paul's side for the cause of the gospel; making the good news of Jesus known. But rather than contending for the gospel, now they were contending with each other.

We don't know what their differences were, and given that they had been escalated to Paul himself, we might think they might have been major differences, but congregations can easily be divided by things that outsiders might consider minor – the colour of the carpet, the wine or grape juice that's used in communion, the types of music played or indeed the way its played.

I knew of a new minister who arrived at a church and said that he wanted the church council to focus on discipleship and evangelism rather than on drains and maintenance. He didn't last long with radical ideas like that!

But whatever the basis for Euodia and Syntyche's conflict, their division had become an issue for the whole church in Philippi.

We are not good at holding diverse views, these days. I was talking to a person I know from another church recently, and he told me he was quite shocked to find out that his two closest friends – who had been his friends for many years – voted the opposite way to he did. He asked me what he should do... should he make some new friends?

Often, we focus on what divides us, rather than what we have in common.

Paul tells Euodia and Syntyche “to be of the same mind in the Lord” or in some translations “agree in the Lord.”

Be of the same mind – don't focus on the division, but instead, find common ground. If your friends vote the opposite way to you... well, maybe don't talk about politics with them?

Paul urges these two women to work together in the Lord. Perhaps if they focus on what they have in common, their differences will become less significant.

But they may need some help – Paul says, “help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers.” Sometimes it's difficult for us to look beyond our disagreements and differences, but someone else can help – help us to see other points of view or help us to focus on what we have in common.

Paul tells those two women – and by implication the rest of the Philippians (and us!) to be of the same mind in the Lord. But then he tells us something else we have to do:

“Rejoice in the Lord always”. And we can tell it’s an important point, because then he says, “I will say it again: Rejoice!”

And then he adds: “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.”

What is gentleness? How is our gentleness evident? This very much reminds me of Jesus saying to his disciples “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (13:34b-35)

I think these things: rejoicing, gentleness and loving one another go together. They are external signs of our relationship with God through Jesus. We can’t see into people’s hearts, can we? But we can observe what they do and how they act. Are they rejoicing? Are they being gentle? Are they loving one another?

Modern Christians tend to be very serious in their faith – and that’s a good thing – but I think our Christian life can be serious to the point of being solemn. I remember at Lay Preacher school, the class was divided into four groups to prepare four parts of a worship service. Everyone took it very, very seriously, and the resulting service was so solemn it was heavy and oppressive. There was no joy at all.

When the church engages with the wider society – or the wider society engages with the church – it’s generally to tell the other side what’s wrong. Where’s the joy? Where’s the gentleness? Where’s the love for one another?

And those things are difficult, aren’t they? How can we manage to be joyful, gentle, loving people in 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia?

How? Well, in the same way Paul encouraged the people to be joyful and gentle people in 1<sup>st</sup> century Philippi: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” (4:6).

Saying ‘Don’t worry’ to a worried person is lot like saying ‘calm down’ to an agitated person. It’s seldom effective in getting the person to stop worrying or to calm down.

But that’s what Paul says here, or at least what he seems to say. I think he means it as an assurance, though – rather than “You must stop worrying now!” it’s “You don’t need to worry”. It reflects what Jesus said to the disciples in John 14, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me.”

We know we can’t stop worrying through our own strength of will, so how are we supposed do it? Paul says, “in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God”. Or as Jesus said “...believe in God; believe also in me.”

To go back to Paul’s earlier imagery, that’s how we, as followers of Jesus, should be running the race. And Paul says “in every situation” – it’s not just the big things that we should be praying about.

I'm sure you've heard the story about the minister who invites a neighbour to church, and she says she'd like to come along, but phones the minister early on the Sunday morning to say she's sick and can't make it to church. The minister says, "Rest up. I'll pray for you." And the neighbours, "Oh, I'm not that sick."

So pray for everything, with thanksgiving, bring our requests to God. It's easy for our prayers to become like shopping lists. "Hey God, these are the things I want. And when your done with those, here's some other stuff you could do." We shouldn't be asking for what we want but rather what we need. The HSC exams will be starting soon, we shouldn't be praying for a student's success or high marks – Jesus doesn't promise success – but we should be praying for calm, for assurance, for peace - which are things that Jesus promises.

I've heard people say that God answers all prayer, but that sometimes the answer is "No." and sometimes "Not yet".

Remember Jesus himself praying in the Garden of Gethsamane, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me." And then adding "Yet not as I will, but as you will."

But there are things for which we can pray for and be confident in receiving - the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, wisdom, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness compassion and self-control (Galatians 5 etc).

The result of bringing our prayers and petitions, with thanksgiving, to God is peace. The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (4:7)

Then Paul writes, "Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." (4:8)

Do we think about such things? I don't think most people do – or at least most people don't most of the time. As well as focusing on division, we focus on the negative. House prices go up – oh, no! housing is unaffordable! House prices go down – oh no, we're losing our fortunes!

So many generally positive things that our governments do are met with cries of, at best, "It's a step in the right direction, but it doesn't go far enough", or more likely "It's a backflip", or "But what about [some other issue]?"

Channel Seven tried adding a 'Bright Side' segment to the nightly news – a good news story to balance out all the other news of the day. It did last a bit longer than their nightly horoscope segment and their daily humour segment did... but it's not there anymore.

So think about it: What do we see that is right? That is pure? That is lovely, admirable, excellent or praiseworthy? Celebrate the good things. Be joyful, even. Celebrate them and share them.

Thinking about those good things should be our deliberate choice. Avoid focusing on the negative and focusing on the division, and find what is right, pure, true and so on in whatever situation we find ourselves in. Or in whichever person we're dealing with. If we do that, we will be following the Paul's exhortation and his example.

"Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me –" says Paul, "put it into practice." That's the key. We have to move from theory to practice. It's easy to say we should love one another – but much harder to actually love one another.

Again, I turn back to Jesus' words on the night he was betrayed: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. (John 15:13-14)

Loving one another is a great idea – and Jesus showed his love by laying down his life for his friends. The very next day, he was raised up on that cross for his friends. For Peter and James and John and all the disciples that heard him say those words, and for all of us too.

And similarly, Paul wrote that even if he was poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from the Philippians faith, he was glad and rejoiced with all of them.

Then, at the end of our reading today, Paul says, "And the God of peace will be with you."

In doing these things, as individuals, and as a church, is how we will stand firm in the Lord.

We need to be the church. Not just an organisation, but the body of Christ. Working together, holding fast to Jesus and what he has done for us, without being torn apart by division and in-fighting. We need to be of one mind as we focus on what is central to our faith, and not let matters of preference or taste divide us. We need to pursue what is good and pray in all circumstances and allow the peace of God to guard our hearts and minds.

And rejoice in the Lord always!

To the glory of God.

Amen.