

Being the church

What makes you grumble?

We all grumble, from time to time, I think.

I've been grumbling this week.

But I should have turned to and reflected on Philippians 2:14, which reminds me, as we heard in our reading today, to "Do everything without grumbling..."

I fear that verse is a bit overused – even if people's intentions in quoting it are good, it's often taken out of context in the church in order to get things done, to discourage criticism, to cajole the unenthusiastic and to be able to address particular, practical problems.

That verse is a verse that is commonly misused or at least misapplied. Perhaps in the same way that verses such as "Judge not, that you be not judged." (Matt 7:1), "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's" (Matt 22:21), and "God will not put on you more than you can handle" (1 Cor 10:13, sort of) are misused or misapplied - they often have a popular interpretation that doesn't match a closer reading of the text and context...

So rather than focus in on that verse, and tell others not to grumble and argue, or feel guilty for grumbling and arguing ourselves, we need to step back and look at the verse in the context of this passage and the whole letter to the Philippians and what it means for us to be a church – and to work together as individuals individually gifted by God, as the people of God.

Paul addresses his letter to "all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi" (1:1). It is written to a community - quite likely a collection of what we might call congregations - who collectively, made up the church in Philippi.

And the church in Philippi, from the tone of Paul's letter, was generally doing well. It wasn't like the other churches that Paul wrote letters to, who were struggling with particular issues. So, Paul's letter is not so much focused on guiding them to fix what was wrong, it's on encouraging the Philippian Christians, and he openly shares his joy and hope with them.

While he shares joy and hope shared in his letter, Paul was in prison in Rome at the time he wrote it. We don't know what it was like, and it might not have been that bad as 1st century prisons go – he was certainly able to have attendants and send and receive messengers, but he was under arrest, he was deprived of his freedom, and he was, very much in fear for his life. Roman justice may have been a bit flexible at the edges, but it was also very harsh. Paul might have had privileges, it wouldn't have been out of a sense of mercy or compassion from his jailors.

So as we consider our reading from chapter two of Philippians this morning, we need to remember where Paul is, how he regards the church in Philippi – with love and joy –, and the intention of the letter – it's encourage, not admonish.

At the end of chapter 1, Paul tells the Philippians to “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ (1:27), and then concludes with “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.” (1:29-30)

And so, because we have the privilege of being followers of Christ, and we should be conducting ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel – so that we can be good examples of the good news – because of that, says Paul, as we heard at the beginning of our reading:

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. (2:1-2)

Paul is asking them to make his own joy complete. And he tells them that they can do this by being like-minded (having the same goals, the same vision), sharing in the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.

It's a great vision for a church isn't it. A group of people, individuals, but coming together as the body of Christ, using their gifts – sharing their gifts – and working out the good news of Christ.

Great stuff. But we are all individuals, and it's natural for groups of people to compete, rather than cooperate. To push others down to lift ourselves up. To put ourselves first.

Paul tells us we need to change that: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” (2:3-4)

People sometimes say that there's Jesus' teaching on one hand, and Paul's teaching on the other. But this passage is a great example of Paul's teaching reflecting Jesus own teaching: Jesus says: Turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, give to the needy, do not store up treasures, don't judge others, and here Paul continues, don't be selfish, do not to work to make ourselves look good. But instead, be humble, put others first, look after others. Support our brothers and sisters in Christ. And of course, in turn, you'll be supported by them. So, our church, instead of being a gathering of individual people with an interest in Jesus, becomes not just an organisation, but the very body of Christ.

Paul calls us to be like Jesus:

“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:” says Paul, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross!” (2:6-8)

And that’s what Jesus did. We know the Easter story, of course, but do we get so used to it that it can forget how momentous it is. Jesus humbled himself. God the Son became truly human. He became a servant. He gave himself up and people killed him. And because of that: [Therefore] God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (2:9-11)

That is the hope that Paul was looking forward to, the completion of God’s plan for the world, and Paul urges the Philippians to ‘work out their salvation together’.

We should be clear, of course: We are not called to work for our salvation, or to earn it in some way, but instead to work out our salvation.

We are saved by the grace of God, but there is a response required to the salvation that we have in Jesus.

Paul tells us that is something that should be done with fear and trembling. We’re not big on ‘fear and trembling’ these days, but Paul is more evoking a sense of awe. After all, he notes in his letter to the Romans "you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear" (Rom 8:15). So, it is not fear terms in terms of being scared, it is fear and trembling in terms of being in awe and wonder. Of appreciating God's power and might.

The 'working out' that Paul is calling for is not an appeal to our own power, but rather to submit to God, because "it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (2:13). That is the action of the Holy Spirit within us, as followers of Jesus.

And it's not just in our lives, as individuals, that the Spirit acts, but in the life of the whole church.

People tend to think that God works in miraculous ways, with spectacular effect, as we’ve heard in recent weeks, with seas parted, pillars of fire, great fish that swallow prophets, thousands fed and so on... but much of our experience of God's work is through the action of the Holy Spirit inspiring and empowering and motivating people. People like us.

By the time we come to the oft quoted verse 'Do everything without grumbling or arguing' (2:14) or grumbling or complaining in other translations, we can see that it's not Paul reprimanding the Philippians for doing so.

Rather, he's writing this to explain how the Philippians should be working out their salvation, to act according to God's purpose. In saying "Do everything without grumbling or arguing" he's describing how they should be working out their salvation.

Paul's exhortation to work out salvation without complaining links back to the stories of the Israelites in the wilderness after they'd been delivered from slavery in Egypt. They complained often.

As we heard in the Exodus reading this morning they asked Moses:

"...Why did you bring us out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" (Ex 17:3)

Rather than being like the complaining Israelites of old, Paul tells the Philippians that they should work out their salvation without grumbling or arguing so that they may become blameless and pure, children without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which they shine like stars in the universe (2:15).

Again, it reminds me of Jesus' preaching in the sermon on the mount "You are the light of the world. [...] let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matt 5:14-16)

And from the light imagery, Paul moves on to talking about holding out, or holding onto, the word of life, the word of life that comes from God. As Jesus said, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, "Man does not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4).

In these things, not grumbling, in being pure and blameless, children of God, shining like the stars and holding out the word of life, the people of God – you and I and all our brothers and sisters in Christ- are being set apart from all the other people of the world.

Paul says that even if he is being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from the faith of the Philippians, he is glad and rejoices with them.

In the face of his own death, he is thinking of the faith of the community in Philippi.

The drink offering, was an offering which was given up completely - the wine was poured out - it couldn't be consumed by the priests after the ceremony. Similarly, Paul was prepared to give himself up. Completely.

What's more, the drink offering was not simply a sacrifice in itself, but something that completes a larger sacrifice. If Paul's life was poured out like a drink offering, it would complete the faithful service, "the living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God" (Rom 12:1) of the Philippian Christians.

And in the face of his own death - his own sacrifice - Paul is glad and rejoices with the Philippians, and he concludes this section by saying "So you too should be glad and rejoice with me." (17b-18)

Paul knows the gospel of Jesus as good news, so even in the face of death, Paul rejoices.

Paul was prepared to make himself a sacrifice for the good of the Church and the spread of the gospel.

People so often want to hold on to the comforts they have, but the world is changing, our denomination is declining in most places.

There are pressures on our congregation. But whatever we face, let's not be like the ancient Israelites grumbling in the wilderness, complaining even after God had delivered them from slavery. It is human nature to grumble, but we can take heart that the through the Holy Spirit, God works in us to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose.

Paul not only encourages the Philippians to work out their salvation without grumbling and arguing, that they may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault, shining like stars in the universe, holding out the word of life. But he also models exactly that.

He was in prison. He was in fear of his life. But he was not grumbling. The good of the church in Philippi was, to Paul, more important than his own wellbeing.

And in doing that, Paul was glad and rejoiced.

As we live our lives as followers of Jesus, our challenge is to work to be like Paul, working out our salvation together, with fear and trembling, allowing God to work in us and through us, without grumbling or arguing, so that we can be seen by all as the children of God, shining like stars and holding out the word of life to the world.

Amen