

Sermon Given by

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### Philippians 1:1-11 - "I've started, so I'll finish"

Last October Helen and I were fortunate enough to spend a week in Sydney, Australia. As the snow falls and the temperature plummets it seems a long time ago! Time and again during our stay there our eyes were drawn to the magnificent Sydney Harbour Bridge - one of the most amazing feats of engineering in the world. Its total length including approach spans is over a kilometre; its arch span is 503 metres and the total steelwork weighs 52,800 tonnes. Work was begun on the bridge in 1926, and 1500 workers laboured for 5 years until it was officially opened in March 1932. It now connects North and South Sydney and carries about 160,000 vehicles a day. So how on earth could such an amazing bridge have been constructed? In the end it was very simple. It required a group of people to work closely together at a shared task and with a shared aim. And when everyone is working well together, it is amazing what you can achieve.

Well last week we looked at Acts 16 and the founding of the church in Philippi - this evening we're looking at the opening 11 verses of Paul's letter to the Philippians. And one of the underlying themes of the letter is that of partnership. Working together in a shared task with a shared aim. Paul had founded this church about 10 years before he wrote this letter and right from the start there was a genuine bond of affection between Paul and the Philippians, which you can see all the way through the letter. And they in return had been devoted supporters of Paul. Again and again they had provided for him. And just recently Paul, who was by this time in prison in Rome, had received another aid package from them. And this letter is really a thank you letter written by Paul back to the Philippians, thanking them for their support as well as tackling a few other issues which they were being troubled by. So there was this great bond of love and partnership between Paul and the Philippians and we like the Philippians are partners together for the sake of the gospel. So let's see what the apostle has to say to us this evening as we look at this opening passage. And he teaches us three elements of what it means to be Christ's church.

#### **1) A Shared Identity (Vv 1-2)**

#### **2) A Shared Task (Vv 3-8)**

#### **3) A Shared Aim (Vv 9-11)**

So the first thing Paul teaches us is that we have **a shared identity**. Knowing who you are is absolutely vital for your personal sanity and growth.

You may remember the film "The Bourne Identity". It tells the story of a man who is found by an Italian fishing crew floating in the sea. When he comes round he has no memory of who he is. He can't remember why he was in the sea, nor can he remember being shot in the back. The only thing he has is a computer chip implanted into his hip which helps him begin the long search for his identity.

It is a terrible thing not to know who you are. And it's spiritually disastrous when Christians have spiritual amnesia and we forget who we are in God's eyes. Which is why Paul begins his letter by reminding the Philippians of their shared identity. V1: *"Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."* In these verses Paul reminds his readers of their identity as Christians. And he says they are *"saints in Christ Jesus."* Now we need to be clear what Paul means when he says they are saints. A saint is not some supper elite Christian. A saint is any and every Christian.

I'm sure that some of us came tonight feeling a bit down in the dumps spiritually, painfully aware of our weakness and failure – well be encouraged if you're trusting in Christ you are a saint. Every Christian is a saint – not because anything great or good about ourselves but because we've been washed clean by Christ's precious blood. Through him we've been made righteous – in fact we've been made perfect. Now, that's crazy you may be thinking – I may be quite a nice person but I'm a long way from perfect. True but because of what Jesus did for us on the Cross we're forgiven all our sin and more than that we're incorporated into Christ. It's hard to visualise that but one way would be to imagine an embrace in which we're totally enveloped by Jesus. But that's not enough because when a person turns to Christ they are actually brought into Christ. That means that when God looks at us He sees Christ's perfection. He sees Jesus' perfect obedience and devotion. That is what a saint is – someone who is set apart, made holy for God. And it comes to us not by fulfilling certain conditions like working a miracle or by decree of the Pope but through faith in Jesus Christ. That's why Paul writes to the *"saints in Christ Jesus"*. Our identity, our status is in Him. Our church name – All Saints Little Shelford should help us remember our identity.

Do you appreciate that you are a saint in Christ? And notice that the phrase *"in Christ"* comes before where we live. The Philippians are *"in Christ at Philippi"*. In other words, our identity in Christ is far more important than our earthly standing – where we live, what we do, how much we earn, what we look like and so on. And if we are a Christian here tonight, then it is vital for us to remember our identity in Christ. So many of the problems we face as Christians stem from forgetting how precious we are in God's eyes. We perhaps live our Christian life wondering if we have done enough for God, yet forgetting that we can never do enough, and he longs for us simply to delight in him as his child. As individuals and as a Christian family, we have the amazing privilege of a shared identity in Christ Jesus.

A shared identity, but then secondly Paul says that we have **a shared task**. And the shared task that Paul rejoices in in v3-8 is a ***gospel partnership based on solid assurance rooted in devoted love.***

a) First it's a gospel partnership. V3: *"I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now."* So what does it mean to be a gospel partner? Well this word "partnership" is often translated "fellowship", and that is a word that is frequently misunderstood. When we hear the word fellowship we might think of meeting up with some Christian friends for a pint down the pub or a cup of tea at home or chatting away over a coffee at the end of church. They are all good things to do but they are not what Paul means by fellowship here.

In the New Testament, fellowship means something much more than meeting together – it means something much more dynamic. It's a word closely connected to the world of business. Perhaps a useful picture of this partnership that Paul speaks of in v5 would be to imagine two entrepreneurs working hard together for their business enterprise. They are in a partnership – a cause for which they have made a great investment and many sacrifices in terms of time, money and sweat. This is more the partnership that Paul is speaking of – a partnership that involves energetic, wholehearted and consistent engagement in a project and the project of Paul and the Philippians was sharing the Christian message with the outside world. The Philippians' part in this gospel partnership with Paul was multi-faceted. One side was the financial support they provided for Paul but that wasn't the only way. No doubt they prayed for him as well. In v7, Paul says that they share God's grace with him as he defends and confirms the gospel. They weren't ashamed of the apostle. They could have backed off – they could have distanced themselves from Paul when Paul got bad press: "well, you know, that's not quite my kind of Christianity...we don't go in for that that brand here in Philippi" They could have said that but they didn't - they stood by Paul because they knew his gospel purpose and they shared it. They were devoted partners in the task of getting the gospel out. And because it was a costly, sacrificial partnership in the gospel; Paul was convinced that God was at work amongst the Philippians. Because it's not natural, it's supernatural when people change plans: remortgage houses, decide to stay with old cars, scrap holidays or go for cheaper ones, and all the other cutbacks that went on at our gift day back in November – for the sake of God and the good of his people and the spread of the gospel. When wallets are converted - that's a clear indication that it is a work of God. And because it's a work of God Paul can say that he is v6: "*confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*" This brings us to our second sub-point.

b) It's a gospel partnership based on solid assurance. Paul is convinced that because the Philippians have shown such commitment to him and the gospel, then God must be at work in them. After all, how else would they have survived ten years of persecution and difficulty? How else would they have the drive and passion to be gospel partners – giving their money sacrificially? No God is at work in you, says Paul. And where God is at work, then he will finish the job. When interrupted by the buzzer, Magnus Magnusson, former quiz master of Mastermind (that great British institution), always said, "I've started so I'll finish." I think John Humphries his successor has adopted it as well, "I've started so I'll finish." If God starts a work in a person's life, then he will bring that work to completion, to be displayed to the whole world when Jesus returns. God is the ultimate starter-finisher. Which gives us great confidence because if we have given our life to him and are seeking to serve him and the gospel, then we can be cast iron guaranteed that he won't dump us along the way. No, says Paul, he'll finish the job. He'll complete his work.

c) And notice third sub-point that this gospel partnership is rooted in devoted love. V7: "*It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify* (ie I call on God as my witness) *how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.*" V8 is a very strong thing to say – Paul calls on God as his witness. As if he was worried they might think that his attitude towards them was somewhat different. Which begs

the question, why does Paul put his feelings for them so strongly in v8? And I think the answer must be his sensitivity over money. The danger for Paul in writing this letter was that it could look like he was saying, "I value you and appreciate you for what I get out of you". But Paul says v8 "No, I value and appreciate you." Full stop. Ie I don't just see you as support – I see you as my family - who I'm devoted to. So he says v8 that he longs for them with the affection of Christ Jesus. If v5 has a business feel to it then v7& 8 have a family feel. After all v8 is not the sort of thing you'd say to your business partners is it? Imagine the John Lewis employee writing a postcard to her colleagues from her holiday in the Caribbean – with the customary "wish you were here". That's probably the last thing she's actually wishing. What she really means is, "I'm glad I'm here and you're there!" But Paul loves the Philippians as family – and when he says "wish you were here, wish I was there, I long for you with all the affection of Christ Jesus" – he really means it. And v7-8 challenges us as to how far we can say the same of each other. My observation is that this congregation is a very loving and caring fellowship and these verses urge us to keep going with loving one another and to do so more and more. They remind us to keep seeing ourselves as a family. We're related – even more deeply in a sense than we are to our biological families, because we don't just share genes; v7 we "*share in God's grace.*" We share the fact that if our trust is in Jesus and his death on the Cross then we are forgiven sinners heading for an eternity in heaven together. We're related. So church is not like a petrol station where you can come and fill up without relating to anyone on the forecourt. And church is not like the cinema where the show will go on whether you turn up or not. Church is family and is characterised by loving relationships - we have a claim on one another – on each other's love and loyalty, on each others shoulders to cry on, on our capacity to share joys and successes, on each others prayers, on each others hospitality, on each others money – you name it. And if we find the language of v7-8 a bit embarrassingly warm then we need to change our idea of what church is.

So we have a shared identity – we are all saints, we have a shared task and that gospel partnership is based on solid assurance and it's rooted in devoted family love. That brings us to our third main point.

### **3) A Shared Aim (v 9-11)**

And that shared aim becomes clear in what Paul prays for the Philippians in v9-11. Time and again, Paul's prayers in the NT reveal where his priorities and heart really lay, and this prayer is no exception. V9: "*And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ--to the glory and praise of God.*" What Paul prays for is what is best for the Philippians. So what is the best? He prays first that their love may abound more and more. Presumably the primary object of that love is God himself and of course love for God leads to love for others. In fact you cannot love God without that love pouring out to others. But such love is not mere sentimentalism. Why not? Because Paul goes on to pray that this love is to be in knowledge and depth of insight. This love is to be shaped by the knowledge of God and spiritual understanding.

So what Paul is praying for is spiritual growth for these Philippians which begins with a love and knowledge for God and results in a love for others. And where does such love and knowledge lead? V10: *"So we may be able to discern what is best and that we may be pure and blameless till the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness."* Paul's prayer has an aim in mind. It is that we might be godly and pure and know what is best and ultimately v11 that God may be glorified. He doesn't want us to meddle in spiritual mediocrity, but to excel in love and knowledge of God which leads to a changed life. The question for us is to honestly ask: "Is this how I pray for myself and for other believers?" That God would allow our love to increase that we might grow to maturity and know what is best for the gospel's sake? If this isn't how I pray perhaps I need to meditate more on the day of Christ – that great day when Christ returns that we see from v6 and v10 was so prominent in Paul's thinking. But when we do regularly pray this sort of prayer for ourselves and our church family, then when all else in life is stripped away, when disaster strikes, when times are tough, you know where your security lies. You'll know what is really important: The love of God and the spreading of his gospel.

One man who faced many storms in his life was the great 20th century preacher Martin Lloyd Jones. One of his toughest storms came at the end of his life when he was suffering from a debilitating disease. He had had a profound ministry and was always very active in preaching and writing. But now he could do nothing. The only strength he could muster was to get from his bed to his chair. When someone asked him how he was coping now he could no longer serve God as he used to, he replied in the words of Luke 10 v 20: "Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." In other words, your foremost joy and delight is to be Christ. And then he added: "I am perfectly content!" Could we say the same in such circumstances when all else is stripped away? Well by God's grace we can, if we make a habit of praying Paul's prayer for ourselves and our church and seeking to live out that prayer – helping ourselves to get to know God better by reading his word for ourselves and studying it in mid-week groups, reading Christian books, serving in the church, doing evangelism. Having that shared gospel aim as individuals and as a church, then we will be able to stand firm in tough times.

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)