

Sermon Given by

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Philippians 2:1-4 - "What brings an apostle joy"

A Catholic priest, a Pentecostal preacher and a rabbi all served as Chaplains in a North American University. They would hold a staff meeting and talk shop. One day one of them commented that preaching to people was not that hard a real challenge would be to preach to a grizzly bear. One thing led to another and they decided they would all give it a try. They would all go off into the woods and see what turned up! Seven days later they would report back. Father Flannery, who had his arm in a sling and various bandages, went first. "Well he said I went into the woods and found a bear easily enough I began to read to him from the Catechism. Well that bear wanted nothing to do with me and began to slap me around. So I quickly grabbed my holy water, sprinkled him and he became as gentle as a lamb. The bishop is coming next week to give him his first communion and confirmation." Reverend Billy Bob spoke next. He was in a wheel chair had one arm and both legs in casts. But he spoke up Well brothers you know that we don't sprinkle but I went out and found me a bear and I began to read to him from God's Holy Word. But that bear wanted nothing to do with me. So I took hold of him and we began to wrestle. We wrestled up one hill and down another until we came to a creek. So I quickly dunked him and baptised his hairy soul. And just like you said he became as gentle as a lamb. We spent the rest of the day praising Jesus. The priest and the preacher looked down at the rabbi, who was lying in hospital bed. He was in a body cast and traction with IV drip and monitors running in and out of him. He was in really bad shape. He looked up and said "Looking back on it, circumcision may not have been the best way to start"!

Well now I suppose you could say that was a slightly anti Semitic joke but actually I have great sympathy for the Rabbi at least he has reflected that his attempt to force his views onto the bear had not been a great success and was now reflecting on what he might do better next time. How the bear was feeling this story does not tell us but pretty upset I guess, don't you? May be there is something for us to learn in this but of course there is much more for us to learn from scripture than any number of silly jokes. So let's turn to Philippians 2:1-4.

Paul has spoken of the struggles he and Silas have gone through at Philippi as we have them recorded in Acts the city authorities had flogged Paul and Silas in an attempt to silence them they had been thrown into jail and put in the stocks. Paul had refused to be intimidated and he had been wonderfully delivered and the authorities had backed off as they realised what they had done to a Roman citizen. Paul strengthens these believers by assuring them that their perseverance under persecution will be a double sign: to the Christians it will be a sign of their election and to the persecutors it will be a sign of the judgement to come. Just as the city magistrates had beaten Paul and Silas so their arrogant demonstration of power had in fact brought danger of condemnation on their own heads they faced the condemnation of Christ when he comes to judge the world.

"This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved-and that by God" verse 28. What a remarkable reversal of roles: the persecuted see themselves as

judges with Christ and their persecutors as on trial in that day. Such a perspective is one which strengthens true Christians in difficult situations when they feel victimised. The command not to be frightened by those who oppose us is still relevant to us all. Sometimes our greatest enemy is not persecution but the fear of persecution; fear of gossip. Fear of mockery, fear of prejudice, fear of discrimination, fear of hard words and resentment. It is they who should be afraid since it is God they are defying and Christ they are rejecting. Who will speak for them on the Day of Judgement? Where will they find shelter having rejected the provision of God? Jesus preached on this matter when he spoke of the sheep and the goats on the Last Day. Where will they be then? Nothing is more able to cut down to size the opposition and reduce our fears than to see them in this perspective. But even persecution is seen in a revolutionary new light when Paul describes it as a gift: Verse 29 *“For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer with him.”* Always seek Christ see him with you on the receiving end of human rejection which you are under going for his sake and he is under going with you. To be with Christ in any situation is a privilege and we hear him say I am entrusting you this experience because I know you can be trusted in it to uphold my name in the on-looking world.”

Now Paul turns from external pressure outside the Philippian church to the quality of life inside the church which alone can counter act those pressures. And we come to our reading. 2:1-4. What a wonderful vision and priority for any church and it should be the priority and vision for every church! People have said to me over many years now what is your vision for the church and I reply in words like these. This is still my vision. The greatest achievement of any church lies not in its fine buildings and denominational prestige or public fame but in its quality of life as a community united in faith and love in Jesus Christ. This is Paul’s concern for these believers in Philippi and nothing must be allowed to diminish that life or endanger it or detract from these goals. That is the joy that the apostle seeks with all his heart. Do we? The directive is straight and to the point. *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.”* Literally the Greek word for vain conceit is “empty glory”. You and I live in a culture of empty glories, a world of instant fame and disposable fantasises. Whether it is “Brandgelina” or David and Victoria! Empty glories!

But we set against that the humblest Christian believer who has been touched by the Holy Spirit and by the glory of God in the gospel of his Son our Lord Jesus Christ. What are the glories of Rome in the Easter glory of Jesus resurrection? Nothing and less than nothing! What will be the glories of your ambitions and mine, our pride, our selfishness, our absorptions and obsessions when we stand before the glory of God the Father? Nothing and less than nothing! What is the applause of the whole world compared to that? *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit but in humility consider others better than yourselves.”* How is that working out in our local church life I wonder? Have we got it right? Humility is something we usually admire in others. We are touched by their modesty, their lack of pride or pretence or pomposity; we find them gentle and patient and helpful and non-threatening and we say “What a decent person that is; how nice; how reasonable.” Yes, humility is something we admire in others. But when we ourselves try it, humility doesn’t feel the same somehow. Indeed, when we try apologising or deferring or counting others better than our selves it feels less like humility and more like humiliation? We feel we are putting ourselves down, missing the chance to score, letting the awkward person get away with it or the pushy person get one over on us. Suddenly what is a virtue in others feels more like a vice in us. In addition the whole thrust of our society and our educational system is against humility. When

did you last win any house points for humility? Our society finds this very, very strange. Our whole economic system thrives on competition it drives the market whether you are Kraft gobbling up Cadbury, or a rich oil sheik buying up a football club. The aim is to win and put others down. But Paul raises the standard of humility in our church life together *“in humility consider others better than yourselves.”* That’s a hard one isn’t it? It is! One of the hardest instructions in all the New Testament I think. Fallen human nature wants to consider oneself better than others. Only the Spirit of God can create in us the humility proper to us and the valuing of each other that is real and realistic. But isn’t there something psychologically unhealthy about considering others presumably just about every one in church, better than oneself? No, because the humility Paul honours and urges upon us here is not a false devaluing of oneself but a true re-valuing of others. We are to see them as bearers of the image of God, people for whom Christ died, men and women who have, quite literally, eternal significance.

The true goal of Christian humility is not self denigration or self loathing which is what in so many it can be twisted by the devil to become. No it is “self forgetfulness” in which a concern for others replaces the priorities of “my comforts, my opportunities and my rights.” You have to be pretty healthy to do this, healthy spiritually and psychologically. Paul continues, *“Each of you should look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others.”* He does not say self interest is wrong in itself, if he did we might be accused of mere idealism, but that self interest is to be tempered and qualified and directed by the interests of others. Let the strong stay strong to help the weak, let the successful be successful but let them help the floundering and the failed, let everyone see their advantages as resources for those who do not have those advantages. He will go on to give the greatest example in all human history of that last point but I’m sure you will reflect on that in the weeks to come. Paul’s concern in all this is not to promote an isolated feeling of self satisfaction but to promote a real and joyful unity in this church at Philippi whose unity is threatened by an internal quarrel. And his point here is that “The most effective way to achieve unity is not to demand that everyone agrees with us but to look to the interests of others and to refuse to claim for ourselves the privileges that rightfully belong to us.” (Thielman Philippians). It is only in such a spirit of closeness, loyal love and unity of action that the people of any church can face the pressures and distractions and discouragements of a surrounding society which is always hostile to true Christian faith. The times when believers feel truly alone, uncomforted and unsupported is when their fellow believers forget them or ignore them or have no time for them.

So Paul has set before the Philippians and before us a model and a vision of how we should relate to one another, and that vision and that model is deeply rooted in the oneness of Christ with his Father as John in our gospel reading brings to our attention. This oneness: the interdependence of the trinity is an even more powerful model for our Church life. Think back to Christ’s temptation in the wilderness as we prepare for Lent. The devil offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if he will fall down and worship him Jesus sends him packing. It is a vital moment in the story; a crossroads. One road leads to Rome, the other to Golgotha. One means a ruthless exercise of power and authority as an Emperor or a Herod. The other road takes Jesus to a mountain where he will sit and teach the people to refuse to take vengeance, to respond to a slap on the face that is designed to humiliate and enforce submission by quietly but defiantly turning the other cheek, to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors to strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness and to pray

Our Father in heaven hallowed be your name, not to pass judgement on others, not to start taking specks out of others eyes while they have great logs in theirs! Or think of another occasion when his disciples ask him a question straight out of Herod's palace who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? His answer is most remarkable. He will call a little child and set him or her in the middle of his circle and say I solemnly tell you unless you turn and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. He will do that not because the child of his age were especially sweet and innocent, but because they are so far from the normal centres of power, because they have no power, no honour no authority no significance in those places, because they are so vulnerable because in short the kingdom of heaven turns the kingdom of Rome, on its head.

Pauls words to the Philippians takes those values and shows them to the church this is how you should be because our whole aim is to grow up into Christ. Do others see that in us? Not just tonight in worship and fellowship but tomorrow morning when its cold and the car won't start and the kids are making us late... again and the computer has just gone blue screen and ...well you know how it is! It's got to be real and it's got to be growing in us or we are lost.

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.)