

**Trinity 19. 15 October 2023**

**Philippians 4:1-9**

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, my brothers and sisters,<sup>[a]</sup> whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. <sup>2</sup>I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. <sup>3</sup>Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion,<sup>[b]</sup> help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice<sup>[c]</sup> in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.<sup>[d]</sup> <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

<sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

<sup>8</sup>Finally, beloved,<sup>[e]</sup> whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about<sup>[f]</sup> these things. <sup>9</sup>Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

**Sermon. Responding to Challenge, Change and Suffering**

I don't know whether you've tried filling in one of those stress scales, one that lists life events that cause us stress? Each life event you tick has a number of points and if you gather a certain number of points your wellbeing is at risk! Christmas and Holiday are on the list as stresses which doesn't get us off to a very good start!!!!

There are a lot of people with a lot of ticks on these kinds of lists! Life has increased pressures and worries at the moment and the horrors of what's going on in the Middle East and Ukraine and political upheaval around the world doesn't exactly help! Stress, worry, change and suffering affects our mental health, our physical health, our relationships... have you noticed the prickliness of folks? As our buttons are pressed our vices thrive and our virtues are pushed to the limit!

Growing up I loved the Mr Men... the Little Miss are good but as a little boy it was the Mr Men I connected with. When I'm at my best... I can be Mr Happy and even Mr Funny! But pushed under too much stress... I become more like My Jelly, Mr Grumpy, Mr Fussy, Mr Worry and Mr Sneeze before their conversion experiences in the books!

How can we be the best of ourselves if and when life and the world deals us challenges and changes that are so tough? How can we be God's faithful people, shining like stars, being salt and light when facing worrying circumstances, changes and challenges, suffering and uncertainty?

**For Christianity to make sense in our lives it has to apply to our lives.**

What does our faith offer to us in the midst of challenge and change and stress?

Well, today's reading from Philippians 4:1-9 might help us. Why? Because Paul is writing to his friends and family in the Church at Philippi. He is in prison! Pretty stressed! He faces the threat of death. It's a tough uncertain and situation. He's scoring high on the stress test!

He writes to a church trying to live the Christian life amidst a people hostile to this Christian faith. Their buttons are being pressed, they are under the cosh and are facing an uncertain and potentially terrifying future.

So as they face challenge Paul writes to them... and I think he writes to us too:

1. **4.1. Be steadfast... stand firm in the Lord!** Echoing the words of Jesus. Those who stand firm to the end will be saved (Matt 24:13). In the midst of uncertainty, hostility, worry, anxiety, suffering, change and challenge, **stand firm**. Firm in Christ. Rooted and grounded in him. Don't lose heart (2 Cor 4) don't lose hope... in him. It's not hard to get tossed around... sometimes life tries to pick us up and throw us around. But here Paul is exhorting... urging Christians to stand firm in the Lord. Firm in your faith and hope. Paul knows the pressures, the toughness of it all... but stand firm.

When the storms come who and what will you hold onto...? "To whom shall we go?" (John 6) Jesus... the Saviour, the firm foundation the Good Shepherd, the Light of the World. Whose love never fails and never ends? Who gives peace beyond understanding and which the world cannot give? Who walks with us through the fire and is our anchor in the storm? Who gives rest to the weary and strength to the weak?

Lift up your eyes to the hills, where does your help come from. My help comes from the Lord. Psalm 121.

If we can stand firm in faith and hope it might help us through.

2. **Plea for unity. (4:2-3)**... be of the same mind in the Lord.... or, agree in the Lord. Paul has in his mind a disagreement here. In particular he mentions Euodia and Syntyche... The reason for disagreement is not clear but commentators believe it must have been more than personal disagreement... their quarrel was affecting the church.  
Paul knows that relationships get strained under stress and circumstance and that it's extremely damaging to individuals and the church. Marriages and families and communities and nations are really under strain.  
We need one another. Stick together. Lean on one another. Support and encourage one another. Disunity, division, blame and criticism... won't help us or others through challenges... such attitudes and behaviours will only bring us and others down when we're going through tough times.  
Pulling together, unity, forgiveness, reconciliation, love one another, as far as it depends on you live in peace. A good attitude and good relationships can really help us through.
3. **Call to rejoice. (4.4).** There's something about praise and worship... rejoicing in God that can help us in our troubles. The call to rejoice is not some glib..."come on let's be happy". No, Paul urges people to rejoice. He's writing to a people in fear and doubt, set in the midst of a hostile and uncertain world.... himself facing the same struggle. Why rejoice? I lift up my eyes to the hills... where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord. (Ps 121). Our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the future glory. Our lives are held in the palm of his hand. Our lives are entwined with a love that will not let us go, that invigorates us, sustains us, holds us and makes us alive! We can rejoice because our citizenship is in heaven. Our eternal salvation assured. Standing firm and agreeing in the Lord are a cause for rejoicing... and rejoicing in the Lord has its affects too.

And we can rejoice because **The Lord is near (4:5)**. Paul faced his challenges knowing that the Lord is near... in terms of his return and his reign in, through and over all things... but also his presence, his proximity! The Lord is here... his spirit is with us. He is near. Those who are set in the midst of stress, torment, challenge and change can draw near to God and he'll draw near to them. In that place of mystic sweet communion with divine providence and intimate grace we can find peace...

the world can't give it... won't give it. Do you know that place? Go there!!!! HE is near and CAN and WILL give it. We can cast cares and burdens and worries on the Lord. Jesus stood amongst the disciples... scared, hurting, confused and broken... Peace be with you. When they saw it was the Lord, they were filled with joy.

How can we respond to change, challenge and suffering? Stand firm, come together in unity/ do relationship well and rejoice.

4. There's one more thing. Now are you standing firm? Yes, I think so. You're in communion with others? Yes. You're rejoicing and know the Lord is near? Yes... ??? Then, what happens? One's mind is assaulted by stuff again and we spiral. Dejection, despair, horror, fear, negativity, moaning, nastiness, low self esteem etc... the devil gets a foothold and steals our joy, our hope, our peace and even our faith. We knocked over, we fall out with others and can't rejoice.

Paul says to guard the mind in Phil 2 (**More than anything you guard, protect your mind, for life flows from it Proverbs 4:23**) and get the mind thinking well. He recognised this to be real key in the midst of challenge and suffering. Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Phil 4:8)

Fill your mind well. As good food and exercise is necessary for bodily health so good thoughts are necessary for mental and spiritual health. We need good food for the body... but also **good food for thought**. What we read, watch and listen to, these externals, affect our minds and our wellbeing.

Kathy and I were talking about climate, the state of the sea and the rivers, the increase in crimes not being investigated, the regular failure of the trains to run on time, the struggles to find volunteers, the increase in the prices, the prickliness of people... "ohhh STOP" said Kathy. This isn't helpful! It just drags us down. At least pray about it if you're going to be Mr Grumpy.

My mind was just full of all that is bad and it didn't help. Kathy also said, "David, we need to realise what we have that is good. It's very easy to bash churches, but we should realise what we have and be thankful."

It's my 11<sup>th</sup> anniversary today as Vicar of Tidenham. There have been many times of hardship and suffering and challenge and change in that time... but there have been some amazing times with God and with everyone here and so much to be thankful for. Fill your mind with this too!

We have some hardships, suffering, challenges and change ahead of us... personally, corporately, nationally, globally, as God's people let us learn from St Paul's teaching.

1. Stand firm in the Lord. Do not lose heart
2. Be of one mind, work together. DO relationship well!
3. Let us rejoice in the Lord and realise that the Lord is near... that God is with us!
4. Fill our minds on what is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable