

FOCUSING ON PHILIPPIANS

Reflecting on life today
by following the four chapters of Paul's letter-the first instalment

1. BELONGING

Background Introduction

Philippi, in what is now Greek Macedonia, was the first European city Paul visited. He did so in response to a vision.

Read Acts 16:9-40

Philippi was a Roman colony with a strong contingent of ex-service families and a small Jewish population. It was a fairly small city in the first century with a population of approx. 10,000 inhabitants.

The impression given in Acts is that Paul's visit was short, culminating in his and Silas' arrest, imprisonment and release. But Paul's stay there was long enough for a lasting bond of affection to be forged between him and the young church, as his letter to them reveals.

It is generally assumed that Paul is writing from Rome, where he is imprisoned, near the end of his life. If that is so, the date of composition would have been the early 60's.

His reasons for writing the letter include reassuring his readers about his own situation; commending their Church member Epaphroditus, and to explain why he is not staying with Paul but returning to them, and also to express his thanks for their gift to him.

Chapter One

The theme on which we are concentrating , and one of the strong themes of this first chapter, is that of belonging.

Read Philippians 1:1-2

belong to God through Jesus. We are called to belong to a community. The church is not simply a group of individuals who happen to have responded to the gospel; it is the community of God's people.

One of the most important insights of the current lockdown situation we are living through at the moment is that belonging to the Church is not primarily centred around a building but to a people. We cannot meet together, yet we still belong. Because we belong to God in Christ, we are all interlinked with each other.

Read Philippians 1:3-8

Paul's thanksgiving for the Philippian community is unqualified and intensely personal.

He expresses joy (4), gratitude (5), confidence (6), and affection (7)

Joy is a constant theme of the letter. It permeates it and breaks through many times, which is remarkable when you recall that it is being written from prison.

His affection for them is no mere human affection but is rooted in the love and compassion of Christ.

What do these phrases have to say about the building of Christian community among us, at a time when we are not able to be together?

Because Christians are members of a community our commitment is expressed in Christian fellowship. That fellowship transcends actual meeting with each other. Writing from prison Paul cannot see the people to whom he is writing any more than they can see him. While it is better by far to be with each other than to be separated from each other, even so there can still be a tremendous bond that holds us all together.

Paul twice refers in these verses to the Philippians having "shared" in the gospel and in grace. Clearly they have shared not only what they have received, but also in what they have given.

Paul's constant prayers of thanksgiving for the Philippian church would undoubtedly have strengthened his own bonds with those people.

In our prayers for other Christians, thanksgiving for each other cements the relationship between us; so that we, too, remember each other with joy, confidence, and affection.

Read Philippians 1: 9-11

We recognise how important our own prayers for each other can be -asking for love, knowledge and insight, so that we can make a healing contribution to those around us.

Read Philippians 1: 12-14

Notice how Paul refers to the Philippians as beloved, brothers and sisters. Is the depth of belonging among us such that we feel we are members of one family?

All the time what is emphasised is that our belonging to one another is because we belong to Christ, that our lives are lived in and for Christ.

Paul says, "My imprisonment is for Christ". Even things that are not what we had planned, even things we might have dreaded, can have a much more positive outcome than we would have thought possible.

Read Philippians 1: 15-26

Paul is describing how the progress of the gospel is going, rather than simply what is happening to him.

He is a member of a community, the body of Christ, and the well-being of that community and the progress of the gospel are all important.

Our own faith tends to be far more individualistic. Many Christians regard religion as a private concern and indeed are encouraged to do so by a largely secular society.

Paul is sustained by hope and by his on-going experience of God's presence-"for me living is Christ". Such hope and experience will survive even death -"dying is gain".

What we are facing at the moment needs to be faced with hope; and can be an opportunity of growing closer in relationship with God.

Read Philippians 1:27-30

These words refer to a depth of belonging that includes a solidarity of suffering with one another and with Christ. Belonging to the family of faith; belonging to the whole human family involves us with what others suffer; and challenges us to live with integrity.