

Together in Christ

Philippians 4



How is your Christian journey going? Is it like picture 1 or picture 2? Or maybe it is a little of both. I think driver 1 has stepped out of the car and is relaxing and exploring the rock pools and God's little creatures, but I can still see the white-knuckle grip of driver 2. The Christian life is wonderful but not always easy.

The first part of this 4th chapter of Paul's letter addresses the problem of dissent within a group of Christians in Philippi. This follows Paul's words in chapter 2 about being in unity, especially in attitude or mindset.

There were 2 specific women in Philippi who were at odds with one another. They were key people, sharing leadership roles with Paul, and with Clement and other co-workers. However, they were not of the same mind with one another. In asking them to be of the same mind, Paul recalls them, not necessarily to one mind about everything, but to a common commitment to the Gospel, to joy in the Lord and to a relationship with one another characterised by gentleness and their commitment to Christ. This is a common grouping for relationships, to consider where we are with God, with others and with ourselves. This commitment is to be evident in prayer and thanksgiving. When they make their requests to God, the peace of the Lord will guard their hearts and minds in Christ. This is also true for us.

Their differences with one another are less important than their unity in the Lord. That unity matters, so that just as each seeks to discern right words and actions for themselves, so they should be confident that the other, whatever their differences, is also seeking to discern right words and right ways to live out their commitment to Christ. They are to fill their minds with whatever is honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable and praiseworthy. (Phil. 4.8) If they, and we, do this, there will be significant common ground.

Paul is very wisely non-specific about what they might consider to be honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable and praiseworthy.

This call to what is right and good is not something new, but a recall to the norm for Euodia [You-oh-dia] and Syntyche [Sin-tick-ee]. They are to keep doing what they have learned and received and heard and seen. If they can do this, the God of peace will be with them and so they will also be

at peace with one another, despite any differences. It is worth thinking of these two people when we say to one another, "The peace of the Lord be always with you."

Have we let go of all that divides us, one from another? Are we at peace with one another? Are we as one in the Lord? Can we live with one another in peace? Does unity in Christ matter more to us than any differences that might lie between us? Have we offered one another forgiveness and renewed relationship? If so, we can rightly say, with Paul, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." Jesus Christ is the foundation of our faith and of our relationships with one another. The biggest thing that we have in common is the only thing that really matters.

Loving our neighbours, we need not seek to have more than them or to be more than them. Paul speaks of mutual concern, one for another. He cares about these people, and he knows that they care about him. It is not just a feeling or a theoretical care, but a care that manifests itself in action, and particularly in varying circumstances.

We have all known good times and hard times. The ability to be content in all circumstances, to be able to live with scarcity and plenty, to be truly contented in all times, is to know that we live always and only in Christ. To know Christ is to be contented, to have enough. This leads up to that well-loved verse, Philippians 4.13, "I can do all through him who strengthens me."

Being able to do all things through Christ does not mean that I can leap high buildings with a single bound or perform astonishing miracles. What I can do is to be content in the love of Christ in all circumstances, good or bad, hard or easy, having plenty or being in need. I am not made content by having plenty or avoiding hardship. Even if it is hard, I am not lacking if I have Christ. Even in easy circumstances, my contentment lies not in these easier times but always and only in Christ. Sometimes having it easy can actually take away some of our awareness of our need for Christ.

Paul is enduring hard times and expresses his appreciation for the care and support he has received. He commends the Philippians for their care of him. He is in prison at this point, but his focus is not on his own circumstances but on their care and concern for him. Paul also asks us to look beyond ourselves and our immediate circumstances.

He commends empathy. The church at Philippi is sharing his distress and the distress of others and is actually doing something to assist in alleviating that distress.

One of the things we do as a church is to help others. This might be done in person or it might be in other kinds of provision. It might be our parish giving to mission, ministry or other care. It might be a practical gift, something enabling, or it might be prayer and encouragement – all are needed.

If you find it easy to give help but difficult to accept help, think of Paul's delight in receiving help. He was not just delighted because it met his need, but because it gave an opportunity for those who gave the help to grow in Christ, and to show the love of Christ to others in need. Paul valued that opportunity for them even more than he valued the actual help that he received.

Today's reading was about the church in Philippi, but also about every church and every group of Christians, whether it be a family, a friendship group, a congregation or parish, or a world-wide group of Christians united in common cause. You may be a part of any or all of these groups and more besides.

Think about Paul's advice, whether it was specific advice to individuals or more general advice to the whole group. We are alike in many things, and we also differ in many ways.

A church is one of the few groups where you can come together with others, not because they always agree with you but because they all share your commitment to Christ.

I ask you to take a minute or two to think of something that you particularly value in this group of Christians gathered here today. If a name comes to you, do not share it at this time. If you wish, you can tell that person, in person, when you have the opportunity. (My hope is that there will be too many names to make this feasible.)

For now, without naming anyone, can you share something you value in this community of Christ, gathered here today? [...]

Let us touch briefly on the Gospel reading. The most striking part for me is the last part about the wedding guest who was turned away for not being clad in wedding clothes. They did not meet the requirements. There are expectations for a wedding dinner, although we know that both the good and bad were invited. I will just leave you with some lyrics from Tom Jones 1971 hit song, *She's a Lady*.

*Well, she's all you'd ever want. She's the kind I'd like to flaunt and take to dinner.
Well, she always knows her place. She's got style, she's got grace, she's a winner.*

She has style and grace. What is the lifestyle that God asks of us? From Micah 6.8 *What does the Lord require of you, but to [?] do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.*

And grace? Grace may look different in different contexts, but it clusters around things like being kind, fair, and respectful to other people, accepting a hard situation or a loss without anger or complaints, a free gift of love, mercy, and help that is not earned, or a prayer of gratitude.

If you have the Jesus lifestyle and reflect God's gift of grace, you are ready for the wedding dinner.

Finally, let us share the advice that Paul gives to his beloved brothers and sisters in Christ in Philippi, **"Beloved, 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. 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."** Amen. (Philippians 4.8-9)