

Philippians 2:1-11, Sermon at St Paul's Banbury, Oct 2020

Introduction

You don't have to look far at the moment to find dispute and division. Internationally, the US elections are providing the watching world a spectacle of conflict. Yet, nationally in the UK, no one could describe our political scene as harmonious. There is a distinct lack of common vision among our leaders in government, the leading scientists, and the public, about the right strategies to take in these times. We are a divided nation. Although that Brexit thing has gone a bit quiet recently.

But it's not just politically. This time of international crisis is having an effect on our lives closer to home. Whether it's our places of work, our schools, our friendship networks, our sports-teams, our homes, and even our church, we've all felt to some degree the loss of a common vision, harmony, and one-ness through this pandemic. That shouldn't be surprising. According to James Lawrence, an expert in leadership with CPAS, there are typical patterns that emerge 'in between' times - when you're coming out of a crisis and haven't yet arrived at new normality:

- Anxiety rises, motivation falls;
- Attendance drops off;
- Old weaknesses/conflicts re-emerge;
- Leaders are overloaded;
- People polarised.

Doesn't that chime with our experience of this time? Lawrence thinks we'll be in that in between time for another year. Now, that's really helpful to know and anticipate, but it's not exactly good news, is it? Another year of disconnection – not just physically (through social distancing) – but socially, relationally, and potentially spiritually. All of that can feel very unsettling. Yet, we are not without hope in Christ. There is good news for us and for our world today through this word in Philippians 2:1-11.

So, let's pray that God himself would minister to each of us through it:

Lord God,

We praise you that you are boundless and ever-present to us, not restricted like we are by computers and screens and social distancing. And so, we pray that you would be with each of us individually, and all of us collectively as we hear from you. Speak to us, and transform us, we pray. Amen.

Background

To briefly summarise what we've heard so far through the letter:

Paul writes with deep love and affection to the Christians in Philippi. They're under tremendous pressure, but Paul's prayerful confidence and expectation is that God *will* complete his work in them to the end. Just as God continues to grow and strengthen Paul – even through his imprisonment - so God will enable the Philippians to stand firm in Christ, whatever comes their way. For they remain secure *in Christ*. They too share in God's grace. Nothing – not even death itself – can take them away from him. In fact, despite appearances, their own suffering and opposition is actually a means of participating in the life of Christ. So, Paul says, "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Phil 1:27).

That brings us to Philippians 2.

Summary

What does “living in a manner worthy of the gospel” look like in the life of the church? How do they stand-firm when they feel pretty weak and powerless? When Paul’s still in prison? And the ruling, cultural, and social authorities seem so much more powerful and dominant than the church? How do we stand-firm amidst the chaos and confusion and challenges we face in the church today?

Through Christian unity. Essentially, his message is this:

You are united to Christ, so pursue unity with one another. Yet, Paul knows that’s easier said than done. So, he helps them (and us) to see how unity is found. He says, **By the example of Christ, pursue unity through humility.**

1. You are united to Christ, so pursue unity with one another.

Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Paul is clearly very impassioned about this. He really does love them and their unity with one-another is so important to him. But, notice the grounds on which he speaks about this unity:

... if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit...

Before telling them how they ought to live, Paul reminds them who they *are*: people united with Christ, recipients of his love and grace, who share in his life by the Spirit.

The doctrine of our Union with Christ is something we’ve been reminded of a lot recently. But that’s because it’s so fundamental to our Christian lives and discipleship. It means being *one* with Christ – at the beginning and always. The Christian life is not just about being forgiven of sin and saved from its consequences, and then becoming better versions of ourselves until we wait for heaven. The Christian life involves so much more.

Remember, right at the beginning of Philippians, Paul addressed his letter to “all God’s holy people *in* Christ Jesus.” Christians are not only saved *by* Christ, nor do we merely follow *after* Christ, Christians are those who truly participate *in* Christ.

In many ways, that’s difficult to grasp. It is a deep mystery. The best analogy God gives us of it is the union of a marriage. That’s why marriage is meant to be a wonderful gift, given to express (although imperfectly) the oneness between Christ and his bride, the church.

We are bound to Christ spiritually and intimately by a bond that was planned before time, and that can never be broken. We in him, and he in us.

Of course, sin continues to dwell in us, seeking to dig in. But, wonderfully, it no longer defines, identifies, or rules us.

Instead, we are entirely “re-defined, re-identified, and incorporated into Christ, and into his unique relationship to the Father.”¹ The Christian life involves living in *Christ*, receiving all the benefits of his salvation through his perfect death and his obedient life.

The implications of this are staggering. What that means is that God not only gives the gift of salvation to us, he ensures that we are transformed by that same gift. How does he do that? By the very presence and love of Christ (2:1). Which is mediated to us by the “common sharing of the Spirit” (2:1). Christ himself is laying hold of us. That’s what brings change. As we will sing shortly, “yet not I ... but Christ in me.”

Now that’s not to say there’s no room for effort in the Christian life. Clearly not because Paul immediately implores the Philippians to

*make [his] joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.
³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.*

And, as we’ll see next week, “working out our salvation” is not something we do apart from God – it remains God’s work in us (Phil 2:12-13). Yet, the point is, mindful of the reality and nature of who we are in Christ, and of his transforming work in us, we *can* and *should* confidently pursue unity. Because unity in the church is the visible overflow of our union with Christ. It’s what we’re made to be.

So, *be* “like-minded.” That is, literally, contemplate on the same thing. Be *one* in vision and outlook.

“Having the same love.” That is, be *one* (joined together) in love. In a love that extends from the comfort and love of God we receive in Christ. Which is a love that is patient. And kind. That honours others. And doesn’t hold grudges. It’s a love that rejoices in the truth, always protects, trusts, hopes, and perseveres (1 Cor 13:4-7).

“Being one in spirit.” That is, of *one* accord. Working together. Pulling from the same direction. Singing from the same hymn sheet. Whatever metaphor you want to use, it is about valuing the harmony of Christ’s body rather than dragging things (or people) in your own direction.

And of “*one* mind.” That is, on the same page in the faith, promoting the interest of Christ, to the glory of God.

One-ness is befitting of God’s people.

What might that look like for you in these times? How could you promote the oneness of Christ’s body, the church? Those are some questions to ponder – perhaps in Grow groups this coming week. It’s certainly not easy at the moment with social distancing, and Zoom, and the rule of 6, and restrictions on numbers at our services, etc. Which is why it’s all the more important that we do *pursue* it.

On the other side of the coin, *disunity* is at odds with who we are in Christ. Doing things “out of selfish ambition or vain conceit” arises out of self-love. Some old writers argue that it’s a kind of lust because it is

“aroused when everyone wants to guard obstinately his own opinion ... ‘Vain-glory’ tickles [our] minds, so that everyone is delighted with his own inventions.”²

Just to be clear, self-love is not the same as care of self. We are fearfully and wonderfully made creatures made in the dignity of God’s image, and we are commanded to rest and be dependent on God.

¹ Grant Macaskill, *Living in Union with Christ: Paul’s Gospel and Christian Moral Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 55–56.

² Calvin, Commentary on Philippians.

We're vulnerable to illness, we need sleep, and food, and exercise, as well as spiritual nourishment. The issue here is not care of self but a self-love that breeds arrogance, greed, jealousy, vanity, irritability, and self-centred gain – all of which can and should be undercut by the grace of God through our union with Christ.

So, we've seen who we are in Christ, and what we are to pursue: unity with one another. The question is, how can we foster that unity?

2. By the example of Christ, pursue unity through *humility*.

You may have seen in the news this week that a very important investigation report on safeguarding and abuse in the Anglican church was published (the "IICSA Report"). You can read it online, but I can tell you, it makes for very difficult reading. What it shows is how a number of ordained ministers in the Church of England and Church in Wales groomed, coerced, and abused those who were supposed to be in their care, for their own gratification. Not only this, the wider church dismissed many of the allegations from victims, failed to act on them, and in some cases actively covered up the abuses for fear of reputational damage to the church.

For years there have been a number of church ministers who wore clergy-collars, and even preached the gospel of Christ, as a platform for their own gain. At great expense and damage to others. It's absolutely tragic.

Although that's an extreme example of some looking to their own twisted interests, it illustrates how easy it is to appear humble outwardly, yet to self-serve inwardly. We, as a self-professing 'gospel church,' are not immune to that. It is the instinct of that sin that continues to dwell within to serve ourselves, to consume, and use things (or even people) for our own ends. Not only is it our natural instinct apart from Christ, it's what we're actively told to do by the many voices around us! They say,

Do everything you can to build up your self-esteem.

Be proud and value yourself above others, always looking to your own interests not those who hold you back.

In your relationship with others, have the mindset of the individualist:

Who, being who they want to be,

Consider equality with God something to be grasped.

They make themselves everything

By pursuing the very best for themselves,

That they might be idolised by others.

Yet, that is not the way of Christ. In contrast to the above, we're instructed:

in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

That means "condescending" – coming down from whatever privileges or advantages or positions of power/influence we have – for the good of others. It means using our gifts to serve the body. It means thinking collectively, not individually. Helping those in need, or those who consider themselves weak or lowly. It means saying "we," not "me."

How do we do that where we are, in these times? There is no doubt that it's much, much harder at the moment amidst the barriers and restrictions. Yet, I don't know about you, but I've been struck by how the little, ordinary things we do have taken on more meaning and significance in these times.

Like the 2 or 3 people in our congregation who print-out and hand-deliver a copy of the service liturgy, the sermon, and the notice-sheet every single week to those who have no internet access. Such a kindness! Or those who've opened up their homes and tables on a Sunday to have someone in who'd otherwise be on their own.

In these times, when face-to-face is somewhat lost, physical presence means so much. One person in our grow group came to church in-person for the first-time last week. That may not have been easy for her for all sorts of reasons. Yet, she shared with the group how emotional and special it felt just to *be* with God's people. And I rejoiced at seeing her there. And we got to share in the worship of *our* God together.

Some of us will be able to do more than others given our circumstances. I actually don't want to provide a list of humble and generous things you could do. A better question than "what do we do?" is "how can we cultivate it?"

Do you want to grow in humility, that you might live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ and build up his church?

Here's what God's word says to us: Look to Christ, receiving the grace extended to us through our union with him. And look *at* Christ, the incomparable example of humility. Verse 5:

⁵ *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus...*

We can't walk in Christ's ways without first contemplating on him. Coupled with Paul's instructions and exhortations, the apostle brings Christ before our eyes. By the Spirit, that exercise of gazing on him forms our posture, and gives us a vision of a fruitful and joyful life - life as it's meant to be lived.

So that's what we're going to do now. With these remaining verses, let us gaze on Christ Jesus,

- ⁶ Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
⁷ rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
⁸ And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

When we looked at John 1-5 before the Summer, Christ's divine nature was very much at the fore. Remember: "He is God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten not made, one in being with the Father." The question is, is that undermined by Christ becoming a servant and taking on human flesh? Does the fact that he "made himself nothing" imply that he gave up his God-ness? The answer is no.

In taking on flesh, the Son did not lose his divine nature. That would make him less than God, and therefore not God at all. Rather, he concealed it. In doing so, he remained what he was, but he also assumed (took on) human flesh. And at that moment, says Calvin, "he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us."³

Not only is Jesus Christ the eternal Son of God, one person of the Blessed Trinity, he truly became a human being. Like us in every way except for sin. That is the mystery of the incarnation. And in his perfect human life, he became the true image bearer, the faithful Son of Adam, the loyal firstborn Son that Israel was intended to be.

³ Calvin, Inst 2.16.5.

In the unity of his person, he fulfilled the work required of him as a man - becoming the great high-priest who represents us, whose obedience (all the way to death) became the source of our salvation.

He did all that - not because he needed us for his own gain. The divine Son cannot gain any more. But because, out of his infinite goodness, he *wanted* us. He chose us. According to the eternal plan of God, the Lord of life voluntarily came down. How great the love of God for us – for Christ to descend *to us* from such a height.

And how arrogant of us to exalt ourselves, to use and neglect others for our own gain, when *this* is what Christ did for us! As Jesus says,

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. //

Of course, the grave was not the end for Jesus. And, united to him, it's not the end for us.

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

At this afternoon's service, we'll be gazing a bit more on Christ's exaltation and all that means for us and for the church. If you can't make it this afternoon, and you're interested in that, there'll be a recording which we'll make available later on. For now, let's close in prayer, using an old, but fitting, prayer called the Valley of Vision:

*Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly,
You have brought me to the valley of vision,
where I live in the depths but see you in the heights;
hemmed in by mountains of sin I behold
your glory.*

*Let me learn by paradox
that the way down is the way up,
that to be low is to be high,
that the broken heart is the healed heart,
that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit,
that the repenting soul is the victorious soul,
that to have nothing is to possess all,
that to bear the cross is to wear the crown,*

*that to give is to receive,
that the valley is the place of vision.*

*Lord, in the daytime stars can be seen from deepest
wells,
and the deeper the wells the brighter
your stars shine;*

*Let me find your light in my darkness,
your life in my death,
your joy in my sorrow,
your grace in my sin,
your riches in my poverty
your glory in my valley.*