

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Adult Scripture Study
Paul's Letter to the Philippians
June 17, 2020

Informational Background

- Title and Authorship
 - Philippi – first church Paul established in Europe
 - In 50/51 CE, he sailed from Asia Minor (Turkey) to Macedonia, in northern Greece. A 10 miles access road from the Aegean Sea brought him to Philippi, named for its founder, Philip II (father of Alexander the Great).
 - The tone of the letter is the most consistently affectionate of Paul's letter – and filled with gratitude.
 - Some conclude that this epistle is a composite of 2 or more Pauline writings fastened together; 1) 1:1-3.1a to 4:21-23, 2) 3.1b-4:20
- (Possible) reasons for Paul writing this letter
 - Reassure his readers about his own situation (allay their natural concern for him).
 - To commend Epaphroditus and explain why he is returning and not staying with Paul (as may have been expected)
 - Express his thanks for their gifts
- Date & Historical Context
 - Problematic to date – mentions prison, but not location – people assume Rome which would date it in late 50's
 - In Philemon, Paul writes that he hopes to be freed; in this letter, Paul seems uncertain about whether his imprisonment might end in execution.
 - We can view this letter as his last will and testament.
 - Philippi fairly small city in 1st century CE (10,000 inhabitants) – located so as to take travelers to the Adriatic coast (by boat) to Italy. Philippi had originally flourished due to gold mines nearby – but by 1st century CE- no longer profitable. Now an agricultural center, where grain and wine were produced.
 - Was a Roman colony—gave citizens considerable property and legal rights and were exempt from taxes imposed on those without this status.
 - When Paul arrived, he would have found a sizable nucleus of Roman citizens, many of whom were Italian by birth and who constituted the aristocracy of the city.
 - Would have found Roman administration and discipline as well as Roman culture
 - Official language was Latin and the city was loyal to Rome, which meant the cult of the emperor would have been much in evidence.
 - No evidence of a Jewish presence in the city (no reference to a synagogue)
 - Paul's converts would have been entirely Gentile.
 - The declaration of Jesus Christ as Lord in 2:11 may well have been intended as a deliberate challenge to the loyalty they were expected to give to the Roman emperor as Lord.

- When Paul wrote this letter, there were members of the church being persecuted (1:28-29) and therefore his stress on mutual forbearance
- Opposition to the early church in Philippi
 - Those who are personally opposed to Paul and whose motives in preaching the gospel are questionable – but these were considered Christians, since they are acknowledged to preach the gospel.
 - The people who are described as opponents of the Philippians and who are persecuting them- would have been pagan outsiders
 - Those attacked in 3:2 who re Judaizers, whether Jewish or Gentile by birth
 - Judaizers- Jewish Christians who believed Christians had to adhere to the Torah
 - People identified as “enemies of the cross of Christ” who appear to be a group of libertines claiming to be Christians but whom Paul clearly considers to be living in a manner totally at variance with the gospel.
- Content
 - Paul affirms his capacity to persevere in joyful proclamation of the gospel even when confronting opposition, suffering and possible death.
 - Humility and unity are vital in this regard
 - The Philippians should strive to match the mind-set of Christ who showed the way to achieve God’s exaltation is not by preoccupation with status – but by becoming humbly obedient and looking to the interests of others.
 - Special attention can be given to
 - his descriptions of his own opponents and those of the Philippians
 - the moving Christ hymn
 - the litany of Paul’s autobiographical details
 - Paul’s reasons for delaying Timothy’s visit to Philippi
- Structure
 - Begins with typical opening – Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ
 - Continues with extended thanksgiving
 - Ends with reiteration of Paul’s thankfulness for the Philippians and their gifts to him.
- Key points made within the letter
 - Joy
 - Remarkable, due to his circumstances (execution?) that the letter is filled with so much language of joy and rejoicing. These are Paul’s most favorite words when he speaks of a life “in Christ” and are especially prominent in this letter.
 - Life in Christ has led him into a state he describes as follows:
 - I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him (Christ) who strengthens me.
 - Imitating Christ
 - One of best-known passages in this letter speaks of imitating the life that we see in Jesus. (2.1-11) It begins:

- If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.
 - Crystallizes Paul's gospel: What we see in Jesus is self-emptying and obedience to God, "to the point of death" even death on a cross.
 - Point to note: emphasis of Jesus being executed by powers of domination that rule this world.
 - God vindicated Jesus, so that Jesus is Lord over all other lords, whether in heaven, on earth, or under the earth (the 3-story universe of the ancient imagination).
 - Paul is telling the Philippians to have the mind we see in Jesus, who followed God even when other lords seemed to have the last word.
 - Main message: Follow Jesus, live the life you see in him, for he is Lord, and the lords of this world are not.
 - Whatever is true and Honorable –
 - Another remarkable passage
 - Paul urges the members of the Christ-community in Philippi to follow what they have learned and seen in him. This is what imitating Christ means:
 - Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, 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.
- Some important terms to unpack
 - Jesus is "Lord" – In Greek, Kyrios- same word as YHWH in Hebrew. – this is a simple title of respect (sir, madam); also, as someone with power over someone else (master, slave) also to counter the "worldly" Lord or emperor
 - Kenosis – the act of self-emptying (referring to Jesus self-emptying his own will and becoming entirely receptive to God's divine will). John the Baptist displayed this same characteristic/action – by saying of Jesus that he must become greater; I must become less. Can be seen as a call to all Christians to be similarly subservient to others.
 - Christology- high or low—what does this mean?
 - =Study of Christ
 - Question of divinity and humanity – how this all came about
 - Was Jesus preexistent and then became human and then returns to God
 - Adoptionism – Jesus was human who was adopted by God at his baptism, crucifixion or resurrection.
 - Source of major debates in early church – focus at the first 7 ecumenical councils
 - Council of Chalcedon – 451- issued a formulation of the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ, one human and one divine "united with neither confusion nor division"

- Some key or important passages to think about:
 - 1:7 It is right of me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace.
 - 1:23 – I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better, but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.
 - 2:2 – “the same mind” – this is a mind-set of humility—be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.
 - 2:6-11 – the Christ hymn
 - Christology – high or low? (What does Christology mean?)
 - Portrays the preexistent Christ as graciously laying aside his extraordinary position of equality with God, emptying himself by incarnation – taking on the form of a servant.
 - For this humility, God exalted Christ by giving him the divine name (taking “name” not in the modern sense of a generally arbitrary label but in the biblical sense of that which truly expresses character, power, and status.
 - Our expected response: do the same – show our love for humanity.
 - Draw upon several Jewish sources:
 - Contrasts between 1st Adam (Gen 2:15-3:24) and imagery concerning last Adam
 - 1st Adam – created in the image of God but, by ambitiously trying to go higher (eat of the tree of knowledge), went lower through his sin
 - Christ – the last Adam – was the very image of God but choosing to go lower (and also dying) thereby becoming exalted.
 - Key Pauline thinking: Christ as the 2nd Adam
 - Motif of suffering servant who “poured out himself to death” from Isaiah 53:12)
 - Preexistent figure of divine Wisdom created by or proceeding from, God who came down to dwell among humans, offering them knowledge of the Divine (Proverbs 1:20-38)
 - 4:4 – “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
- Importance of Paul's letter to the Philippians
 - Has had great influence on the thought of later theologians, largely because of the significant ideas expressed in the hymn: 2:6-11
 - To a large extent, this passage has been interpreted in a way never intended by Paul.
 - Poetic language was analyzed as though it were the language of dogma, and the passage was taken as an authoritative statement about the divine and human natures of Christ.
 - In the 19th century the “kenotic” theory of incarnation was based upon it.

- Good to remember that Paul did not write it to deal with the issues of Christ's divinity and humanity that the Church Father and Mothers in the 4th and 5th centuries dealt with – but to spell out the way in which those who are in Christ ought to live.
- Paul's focus was not so much on what it says about Christ, but in its implications for the lives of those who acknowledge Christ as Lord.
- It is Paul's insight into the relevance of divinity (who and what God is and does) to true humanity (who and what men and women should be and do) –
 - Movement from “theology” to “ethics” – this is what makes this letter of great and lasting theological significance.

Questions/Areas to Explore/Ponderings

1. Paul speaks about **joy even in the times of suffering**. How would you define joy? How do you distinguish it from happiness? When have you felt joy, even in the midst of something really hard? What was that experience like for you? What words would you use to describe the experience?
2. Paul writes, **“It is right of me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace.”** This statement makes me believe him to be saying all who share in God's grace, hold everyone else who shares in God's grace in their hearts. This sounds like a wonderful thing to happen. How do you think this works? How would you find or live into that statement? Would you look at the moments when you most vividly experience God's grace and notice your awareness or love of others? It sounds as though this naturally happens, as though one thing leads to the other (grace, love for others who experience grace) – and is not something we can make happen, but rather we allow to unfold. What do you think would help you allow it to unfold? What do you think could be a barrier to it happening in your heart? What spiritual practices might you want to do to open the space for the unfolding of this love. How might this be essential/helpful in our current world situation?
3. Paul includes the words, **“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”** Our liturgical blessing is an adaptation of this line in Paul's Epistle to the Philippians. We say, “The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of God's son, Jesus Christ our lord.” What differences do you hear? What implication might the adaptation have in our understanding of the relationship of God to Jesus? It seems the adaptation takes “all understanding” and breaks it down into the “heart” and “head” spirituality types (knowledge= head, love=heart) – how do you approach your understanding of God? What is the difference in meaning between “guard your hearts” (Paul's letter) and our liturgical blessing “keep your hearts”. Which resonates most with you?
4. A major concept in this letter which is carried forward in Christian theological development is **Kenosis** or the self-emptying of Jesus – as that being the pathway to union with God. It was through Jesus' release of his own will to God's will that is our salvation – and each time we do this (self-empty to align ourselves with God's will) is when we experience a piece of our salvation. When have you intentionally released your will (ideas, motivations, desires) to that which you would see as God's will? And how did that work out? Can you think of any small or large examples of this? What did it feel like? What was the outcome of your heart?

5. Paul also speaks of the **preexistent Christ** – which means the Jesus that walked this earth was in the form of Christ at the beginning of all time (at creation). Scholars think that we have misinterpreted this poetry as dogma and Paul was more interested in the focus on how we live this out in our lives. So What difference does it make to you if Christ was preexistent before becoming the Jesus who was a human being? How would this fact matter in the way you would think, what you would believe, how you would feel or act in this world. Can you imagine a challenge and a comfort in this fact?