Philippians 2 – A Christ-Centred Life
Deut 6:4-9; Phil 1:1-11; Matt 16:13-19

I may only have been with you for 9 months, but as I look around, I think of your warm welcome, your hospitality, your patience in waiting for the toilet & kitchen & heating to arrive; I think of beautiful flowers and wonderful services, of sharing ministry and sitting over a cup of tea and listening to your stories. It's easy for me to echo Paul's words in V3: I thank my God every time I remember you!

Last week, we looked at how Paul arrived in Philippi, and the series of encounters – with a trader in purple cloth, a spirit-possessed slave girl and a Roman Gaoler – which launched the first European church.

Now that we have met some of the church members, and heard some of their stories, we can see how phrases in this first section of Paul's letter to them suddenly come alive! V6. *I am confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus*. Paul, and Jesus, were there at the start – and Paul can trust Jesus to be with them to the end.

Or this: V7 *I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel,* (both of which had been his experience in Philippi,) *all of you share in God's grace with me*.

Actually, it's clear in the passage that follows our reading, that being in chains and defending the gospel with argument or confirming it through the power of the Spirit and the life of faith – are both part of Paul's present life too. So, just as Paul can imagine the situation in Philippi, the Philippians also can imagine Paul's current situation, because they saw his life and

ministry in Philippi. The love and prayers are clearly two-way.

And that will become abundantly clear in chapter 2, when we discover that this is also a thank you letter. Roman prisoners weren't fed by their gaolers, but relied on their friends to keep them supplied with what they needed. And the Philippians, hearing that once again Paul was in prison for the sake of the Gospel as he had been at Philippi, had sent one of their number, Epaphroditus, to Paul with financial support.

This gives Paul a good reason to write to them; and also to encourage them and teach them more about their life in Christ. He didn't have long with them in person – so he makes up for it now.

When Paul writes an Epistle, he follows the standard Roman template: starting with who the letter is from, who it's to, a greeting, and what he's writing about.

But Paul reshapes the template, demonstrating once again how the gospel changes culture around us. Instead of using the initial formula to establish his status with regard to the Philippians, he uses it to position them both with regard to Christ. V1: Paul is not their founder and leader, but Christ's servant, or rather slave. And the Philippians are not his church, but God's holy people in Christ Jesus.

And the greeting is not from Paul at all! It's from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

So from the very first words of the Epistle, Paul is underscoring that for Christians *everything* focuses on Christ. We have no status, no rank, with regard to

each other. We are all at the same level – God's holy people. And if, like Paul, we are leaders, our status is even less – we're just Christ's servants.

Look around you. Go on. Who do you see? These are your brothers and sisters in Christ. Your relationship with each other is only and above all through Jesus. And if any of you have taken on leadership of some sort – it's as a servant of Jesus. I am not **T**he **R**ector – I'm just a servant of Jesus.

For a church like the one at Philippi, which from the very beginning included wealthy traders, slaves and Roman citizens, (and where status was fundamental in defining relationships,) how Paul writes is both startling and a crucially important lesson.

And it is for us too. Everything starts and ends with Christ, whatever our culture or our feelings might be telling us. Our lives are to be Christ-Centred.

So having told the Philippians the basis on which he is writing this letter, Paul goes on to outline what he wants to write about. But here again, he does so in an unusual way. He touches on the topics of the letter in a prayer for the Philippians. This does three things.

Firstly, it continues the lesson that everything – including what we want to say to each other is centred on Christ. It's only worth speaking if Christ is in it.
If you've got an issue with someone – start by praying for them. Bring them to God. It will soften your heart; it will show you God's perspective; and it may change them too!

Secondly, the prayer shows Paul's heart, and his incredibly rich prayer life If you want to know how to pray for your church or for other Christians – just read some of these prayers of St Paul and make them your own! But remember - they aren't just beautiful generic prayers, like the Collects. Each of them comes from Paul's praying for one of his churches with its particular strengths, weaknesses & needs.

And thirdly, the prayer touches on some of the topics which Paul will be addressing in his letter. It lets the Philippians know that he loves them enough to pray for them, and to wrestle with their issues before God, and to bring them the fruit of his thinking and praying. Which means he can introduce sensitive issues without unnecessarily raising defences.

So for instance, in V3-5, soaking it in thanksgiving and joy, he broaches the issue of partnership – some of the difficulties of which he'll explore later.

3 I thank my God every time I remember you. 4 In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now,

In V6 he introduces in a really positive spirit the need to keep on changing behaviour and growing in discipleship. *6 being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

Keep reading from v8:

8 God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, 10 so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that

comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.

Once again, he declares his great affection for them, before mentioning their need to grow in knowledge, discernment, purity of thought and right living.

All of these will be important themes in Philippians. None of them are easy. But when the Philippians get to the point when Paul is challenging them – they will know that Paul cares about them, that he is praying for them, and that these things matter to Jesus.

Well, I hope that if we ever get to a similar point, you'll already have discovered the same things about me: That I care about you, that I'm praying for you, and that the things we're talking about matter to Jesus.

But in the meantime, we need to go on reminding each other of what for Paul is absolutely central. As he reminds himself and the Philippians in this opening passage of the Epistle:
It's all about Christ.

We are his holy people – set apart for his purposes. And our status with regard to one another is as fellow servants of our one Lord – Jesus.

And, *grace and peace* comes to us not from our wealth, or our past, achievements, or what others think of us – but *from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*.

And so we commit ourselves to Christ's service, and to growing in love for Christ and to treating one another with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Our other two passages say the same:

As Moses says in Deuteronomy: There is only one Lord – and we must love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and strength. And that truth needs to be fixed in our homes, in our conversation and in our family lives.

And who is the Lord our God? Peter got there first. You, Jesus, are the Messiah, the Christ – the Son of the Living God. And this recognition is the rock on which we build our church and our lives.

Shall we pray?

Let's use St Paul's prayer:

Heavenly Father. May our love abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.

May we be able to discern what is best.

May we be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, [11] filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of you our God.

And may we be confident of this, that you who began a good work in us will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Amen.