

Trinity 22

I take as my text today from St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians:

And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; that ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere without offence till the day of Christ; being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable in thy Sight, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.

Paul's Letter to the Church at Philippi is quite remarkable. It is a reflection of the joy of a relationship that began with Paul's visit to Philippi about the year 52, during his second missionary journey.

Urged on to visit Philippi by his vision of a Macedonian man appealing for help, Paul made his way to this Roman Colony, where he set up a Church, endured persecution and false imprisonment, and established one of his closest relationships with a congregation.

As Paul writes to the Philippians, he is imprisoned in Rome, with little hope of being released. It is about the year 64.

The occasion for writing to the Church at Philippi is the slave Epaphroditus, who Paul is sending back to them.

Epaphroditus was not only a bearer of a gift to Paul from the Philippian Church; he WAS their gift to Paul, to be his servant. But, Epaphroditus had become ill, perhaps suffering from homesickness; so Paul allowed him to return to his home, at the same time beseeching the Philippians to treat Epaphroditus as an equal, and not to hold his illness against him.

Paul thanks the Philippians for their generosity; he praises them for their constancy, their love, and their friendship; and he shares with them the joy of being a Christian, a joy that is not dampened by his imprisonment, but only enhanced.

Here, in this letter, Paul, a prisoner himself, offers encouragement to the Church at Philippi as it, too, endures persecution, expounding on the marks of the Christian Life.

Those marks of the Christian Life are woven throughout the Epistle: prayer, evangelism, faith, fellowship, suffering for Christ, hearing the news of loved ones separated from us, hospitality, deep spirituality, apostleship, and caring.

The verses appointed for our Epistle reading today, verses 3 thru 11, provide a kind of introduction to the tone of his letter, reflecting between the lines a relationship bound by mutual love and respect, with Paul seen as a father instructing his children.

Paul's letter flows with love and confidence that the good work that God has begun in the Church at Philippi will be completed. His underlying theme is that the life of every Christian is a sacrifice ready to be offered to God. We are the sweet savour ready to be offered up to God.

Indeed, we confirm that in the celebration of the Eucharist when we offer ourselves as "living sacrifices" to a living God.

While we may offer ourselves individually to God's service, it is in the Eucharist that we offer ourselves corporately as "living sacrifices". Truly, it is in our corporate acts of worship that we affirm a Christian Partnership built upon the Love and Grace of God.

As Christians, we are partners in Grace, having accepted this unfathomable gift of God in common; we are partners in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, sharing in the work of spreading the Good News throughout the world, and sharing in the suffering of those who come under attack for the sake of the Gospel; we are partners in Love, sharing in Christ's Love for all of mankind, for all of God's Creation.

It is God's Love through Jesus Christ that inspires us to emulate our Saviour; opens our eyes to see the Truth; strengthens us to resist evil; and makes our hearts sensitive to the feelings and spiritual well-being of others.

As partners in Christ, we strive for a purity of character that will withstand the harshest scrutiny, being sieved and cleansed, and striving never to cause others to stumble in their journey of faith.

As partners in Christ, we have as our goal to live our lives to the praise and glory of God, attracting others to our Lord by emulating His gentleness and love.

From the beginning, Paul tells the Church at Philippi that it is with joy that he prays for them, for they have brought him joy by being partners with him in the spread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and in enduring the hardships of a living faith in a hostile world.

And he tells them that he prays that the good work begun in them will find its completion at the Coming of our Lord. Paul's language here is sacrificial, intimating the process wherein they are made holy and living sacrifices.

We, too, are incorporated into that sacrificial process when we accept God's Love and Grace, freely given, and become Partners in Christ.

Within that Christian Partnership, we focus our lives on living up to the Marks of a Christian, directing our worship towards God, and sharing in, with our Family in Christ, the resulting joy that fills our hearts through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

In a world that would otherwise consume us, our Partnership in Christ brings us into that union which frees us from the cares of the world, and directs our focus on our true, heavenly home.

When Paul wrote his letter to the Church at Philippi, he had not seen them for many years; yet, his remembrance of them was filled with joy, for he shared with them a partnership founded upon the Gospel of our Lord, a partnership that united Paul and the Church at Philippi in the Love and Grace of God.

Together, though separated by distance and time, they could withstand the challenges of a world wrought with evil, and in which both he and they were persecuted for their Faith in Jesus Christ. Indeed, distance and time could never separate those joined together by God's Grace and Love, which is eternal, those joined together in the Communion of the Saints.

Thus it has been through the centuries, even before Paul wrote his letter, that men and women have united in Christian Partnership to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ, enduring joyfully whatever hardships and sufferings are brought upon themselves for their faith and love of God, and for their care and love of all God's Creation.

That we are united in Christ, as a partnership, as a family, and are not alone in our sacrificial winnowing, is apparent in the Collect for today, where the Church is compared to a household; even in our oft sung hymns for Communion, we are reminded that we are “*one Body...One Church united in communion...One with each other...*” united in Christ.

While the world does not make it easy for the individual Christian, through unity, through fellowship, through corporate worship, through Christian partnership, through the Love of God shared within our Family in Christ and with others, we can enter fully into a life of Christian Joy, confident that the good work begun in us will be complete at Christ’s return.