

# REJOICING IN THE PROGRESS, PROCLAMATION & POWER OF FAITH

*Kath Jones*

The church in Philippi, a Roman city in Macedonia, northern Greece, was founded by Paul, Silas and Timothy, its dramatic birth evidencing the power of the gospel in the most unhelpful of situations (Acts 16:6-40). Paul left behind the core of a new church - a slave girl, a prison guard, a rich business woman, their families and households. Called out from very different life circumstances and backgrounds, each with different gifts and talents, they were likely the first in the whole of the European continent to come to Christ. By the grace of God, they were growing in faith despite persecution, a suffering they were 'privileged' to share with Paul (1:29-30). Paul hints about tensions within their fellowship (2:21; 4:2), but he is clearly deeply fond of them and the partnership in the gospel which they have shared from the beginning (1:5). Writing from prison shapes much of what he says to them and of course the immediate realities of our own context can also shape our response to his teaching. Seven weeks into the COVID-19 lockdown as I write, grateful for contributions made by members of my own congregations, what lessons can we take from Paul?

## 1. PRAYER FOR THE HARVEST: 1: 1 – 11

In contexts where his authority had been more questioned, Paul emphasises his apostleship and his divine calling, but to the Philippians he calls himself and Timothy 'servants', ('doulos' - a bond servant or slave). The first verse emphasises a key point in the letter, namely that sharing the gospel is about responding to, and partnering in, the humility and obedience of Jesus (2:1-11). It shows the depth of relationship and the bonds of mutual love which they and Paul shared. Paul rejoices in their faithfulness since they first accepted

the gospel from him, affirming them as true partners in the gospel (1:5,7). They are for Paul a blessing. Paul is confident that God would bring to completion all that he has begun in them, knowing that what God begins and purposes in all his saints does not stop, and neither does it find complete fulfilment till the 'Day of Christ' - disciples do not retire, and discipleship does not go on hold just because we are in lockdown (1:1,6-10).

Paul's prayer is full of joy, thankfulness and gratitude. Indeed, the whole letter is rooted in and overflowing with joy. It is amazing for a man living under lockdown. This is one of several occasions when Paul was imprisoned, his options severely limited. Tom Wright describes the vocational frustration of Paul's situation, an apostle confined in prison, as akin to a concert pianist with his hands tied behind his back. Some of us may well identify with that! Paul must have rejoiced in those moments of contact with others such as Timothy and Epaphroditus (1:1, 2:19-25). Paul finds further joy in praying his thanks to God for the Philippians, (1:3), praying with heartfelt joy because of their partnership with him in the gospel, (1:5), grateful for their active support and prayers, (1:19; 4:10, 15-16), later declaring them 'my joy and my crown' (4:1), and urging them again and again 'rejoice in the Lord' (3:1), 'rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice' (4:4).

- Perhaps you could write a prayer of blessing to give to someone whose partnership during the pandemic has been a blessing and a joy for you.
- What 'good work' has God been doing in your life?
- During the pandemic what progress in your faith and discipleship can you see?
- How and why have you rejoiced?

Like Paul we 'long for' full fellowship, (1:8), yet many also feel a renewed sense of belonging even in the scattering, a revitalisation of our core purpose awakening in us. During lockdown I take great joy in seeing the people of God engaged in mission, doing exactly what they have so often been urged to do, seizing hold of new ways to serve and to proclaim the gospel. Almost 'all the saints' (1:1) are finding new ways 'just to be more visible' as one of my members put it. People who had never played much of a role in church as it existed pre-lockdown are bringing new gifts and talents into the missional mix. Those furloughed, or on the most restricted lockdowns, are still finding ways to be church, to incarnate Christ in their context.

## 2. NOT BEING WHERE WE WANT TO BE - PERSECUTION AND PROCLAMATION: 1:12 – 24

Warning, I am going to use that word again, (have we stopped using it yet?!); the COVID-19 pandemic and its ongoing social, political and economic impact were unprecedented. Individually, nationally and globally our human plans and schedules fell off the table. We have no guaranteed exit strategy and, without a vaccine, no real end point. So it is helpful to realise that Paul was not where he had anticipated being either, writing from prison to a church in a city which he had originally not even wanted to visit! His aim had been to go to Bithynia (Acts 16:6-7). But other than a reference in 1Peter1:1 to the Diaspora in Bythynia, there is no Letter from Paul to the Bithyians! God's purposes required Paul to go elsewhere, the Holy Spirit forbidding them from preaching in Asia, and the Spirit of Jesus preventing him and his companions from entering Bithynia, leading them instead to Troas

(Acts 16:6- 8). There, asleep one night, the Holy Spirit gave Paul a vision of a Macedonian man calling out - 'Come over to Macedonia and help us!' (Acts 16:9). In obedience, Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke chose to set aside their own plans, and head to Philippi. Philippi was a Christian community founded by the Spirit of Jesus, and by Paul's willingness to let go of his own, human plans and follow the Spirit's lead.

But obedience didn't mean it all went wonderfully well thereafter, as witnessed by his imprisonment in Philippi and many other privations since then. Having asked my two congregations to read Philippians 1 as part of their lockdown Bible study, some feel as if they too are in a kind of prison, fearing that even as we emerge from lockdown the economic and social impact will close down their life options moving forward. Desperately missing fellowship, family and friends, they admit to being hugely challenged by Paul's prayerful rejoicing from prison! It is somewhat reassuring to know that Paul is just as human as we are. He didn't always feel joy in such circumstances, at times imprisonment had made him feel 'utterly, unbearably crushed', despairing of life, in peril and desperate for escape (2 Corinthians 1:8-10). Suffering in prison, facing possible death (1:17, 20), he later describes it as 'being poured out as a libation' (2:17), once again finding himself a Gospel 'ambassador in chains' (Ephesians 6:20). He knew that the 'keep on going which he urges (4:9) is not always easy. He had experienced times of abundance as well as times when he was utterly dependent on others (4:11-18). In our context, we can identify with some aspects of this, but many of our sisters and brothers across the globe will identify with it all.

Always however, Paul trusts the Father and has such faith in Jesus that he knows that to die would be gain (1:21-23). In this there really is joy! Standing by the graveside of those saints who have lost their battle with the virus, feeling the grief and deep sadness in their family's isolation, I also felt joy in their being set free to be with the Lord, a "far better" place (1:23). Nonetheless I admire the way that Paul speaks of his own pain and suffering, and admits to weakness.

One of my lay leaders reminded us that, like Paul's mission to Philippi, we are also being held in God's eternal purposes

and that, because of God's grace and peace, 'the community of believers is not confined by confinement and so can grow numerically and spiritually'. Paul has witnessed to the gospel even though in prison - those in authority and power know about Jesus as a direct result of his suffering (1:12-14). His joy that, despite his own imprisonment, the gospel is still being proclaimed in Philippi, was undiminished by any concern for exactly who is preaching it, how or from what motive: 'Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true, and in that I rejoice' (1:18). Even amidst a pandemic we rejoice in an explosion of gospel proclamation and an openness to listen. The good news is being shared online with churches offering marriage courses, Bible studies, Lectio 365, virtual cafes for coffee/chat/prayer, online and In-Car Alpha, and numerous enquirers groups, etc. My own members report countless 2-metre-distanced but serious doorstep/over the fence chats with neighbours and with those for whom we have been collecting shopping, prescriptions or delivering food bank parcels and offering to pray.



Paul's initial evangelistic strategy was to focus on the synagogue and work out from there, a building-centred mission. In Philippi he changes tack, possibly because there was no synagogue, joining those few people who gathered outside by the river for prayer and worship. From this gospel engagement with people where they already were came the first real growth. Many churches are

also changing tack, being purposefully pragmatic, flexible and proactive, and this is producing a renewed missional vitality and increased engagement. As technological knowledge and its use grows exponentially across the UK church, we have engaged more intentionally with the online 'river' where so many gather to build relationships and find community. In April the numbers of people reported as attending a Sunday service leapt from an average of 5 - 7% (normal, real time church attendance) to 24% of the UK population (online attendance), with the most engaged age group being the hard to reach cohort of young people aged 18 - 34. Many people have turned to prayer since lockdown began - members in one of my congregations have set up an online/phone prayer and listening service for example, and online bookstore Eden reported a 55% increase in sales of Bibles in April. People are asking deep questions such that my congregations can see that the pandemic has 'actually helped spread the gospel' (1:12), bringing them hope for the future. As we emerge into post lockdown realities, will the church be flexible enough to set aside our human strategies and systems to give the Spirit of Jesus time and space to fan these embers of faith into full flame? Seven weeks into lockdown I praise God that we are indeed in a place that we never wanted to be if it means that as a result the nation is witnessing the church actually being church.

- Where has the gospel been demonstrated and proclaimed best in your context?
- What had to change to enable this?
- What has brought such life and vitality that it must continue moving forward?
- What can be set aside?

## 3. PRIVILEGE AND JOY IN SERVING THE GOSPEL: 1:25 – 30

Paul's one aim, the true privilege of faith, is to exalt Jesus Christ, whether through death or through staying alive. He warns them that any progress in joy and faith depends on them standing firm in faith: 'live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' (1:27) - in other words living today as one who knows that Jesus is already King of the world is the key to knowing joy. How can you have true joy and hope in the midst of all the uncertain circumstances around

you? The answer is to connect with the gospel fully. Know that Christ is King and he is still on the throne! Reading Paul inspired one of my members to work out seven ways whereby, whatever our circumstances, we can turn negative, unhelpful thoughts into positive prayers and actions - if we live as one who is under his Lordship:

- Be still: spend time with God in prayer, Bible reading and worship.
- Be thankful: especially for things that have previously been taken for granted - freedom, choice, family, friends, gardens, etc.
- Be thoughtful: be aware of the housebound or disabled, those without families, and how isolation can be their daily norm. Think of those who are worried about jobs and finances - we are in the same storm but we are in different boats; be kind.
- Be grateful: show real gratitude for the many kindnesses being shown by others.
- Be productive: do something! NB: In her case this was knitting beautiful little hearts for the local NHS palliative care teams (see photo). Once suitably sanitised, the staff give one to the patient, and a duplicate to their family who are unable to visit.



- Be witnesses: at home, and wherever, whenever possible.
- Be at peace: don't be anxious. God has not given us a spirit of fear!

Finally, the pandemic was, and likely still is, a deadly reality into which we are called to mission. Over these weeks I have ministered into some very difficult and heart-rending situations made worse by the social distancing. Not to be able to be physically alongside people is hard - yet there are blessings. I have been able to affirm our older, frailer members that their ministry of prayer has become our most essential tool for mission. I have had the privilege of walking through the valley of the shadow of death alongside isolated, distraught families, talked with frightened nurses and funeral staff, and witnessed an openness to the gospel that is new in my lifetime. I have ministered to and been ministered to by chaplains in our local hospitals. I also had the great joy and privilege of speaking over the phone to Jean, one of our oldest Local Preachers, a few hours before she died from the virus. Her death reminded

me that the coronavirus is misnamed, it is not the king of anything - that honour goes to King Jesus who rules over all. More than ever, along with Paul, Jean, and all the saints, this then I know to be true, 'The Lord is near... To our God and Father be glory, forever and ever. Amen' (4:5, 20).

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## DEVELOPMENT WORKER FUTURE APPOINTMENTS



Please pray for Derek Balsdon, our Development Worker, as he ministers around the Connexion. Please consider how your church or circuit could be encouraged by his ministry.



*July*

**18** | Remaining Faithful: Moving Forward (Online)

*October*

**3** | MET Executive

**10** | Word 2020 at The King's Cross Church, Doncaster

**17** | Digging for Treasure, Methodist Central Hall, Westminster

**31** | Day Conference - Speak, Lord: Discerning God's voice in a confusing world (Online)