

Lord, as we study Paul's teaching to the early church in Philippi, help us to realise the relevance of his writing to us today, and show us how to put it into practice. Amen.

Living for the Gospel (Philippians 1.27-30; John 17.20-26)

A few weeks back we attended a very interesting **presentation of a new book**. The lively author soon established connections with his audience, talking about his upbringing in the area where we were, the local football grounds (where as a cub reporter he had covered matches enthusiastically from the age of 15!) and especially his gratitude for the **support and positive influence** of family, teachers, friends and colleagues. After this "warming up", he came to the real message, highlighting some of the key points of his new book.

That, I would suggest, is **where we have got to** in our series on Philippians. Following the usual practice in his day, Paul has confirmed his bond with his readers, thanked them for their support as partners in the Gospel, given a brief autobiography of life so far, and explained how his enthusiasm for the Gospel has been increased by his time in chains. (Fiona's reference last week to the "*smell of prison*" will stick with me for a long time.)

In today's passage Paul comes to his **key points** as he switches from his own problems to seeking reassurance about his readers' affairs. He tells them to be like him, *not to be frightened in any way by those who oppose you* (v.28) and reminds them: *you are going through the same struggle you saw I had ... and that I still have* (v.30). In brief, they are to **live for the gospel, be united for the gospel, fight for the gospel and suffer for the gospel**. Indeed, these verses at the end of Chapter 1 represent a summary of Paul's pastoral advice to the church. They are to consider a lifestyle worthy of *the gospel of Christ* (v.27) and the nature of discipleship *on behalf of Christ* (v.29).

Live for the gospel

Our first verse (v.27) can be summarised as "Live a life marked by the Gospel, stand firm under pressure, guard your unity". Chapters 2 and 3 (which we will be looking at over the coming weeks) will expand on this. But let's start thinking about it now. **To what extent do our lives reflect the Gospel** we talk about? Are they full of love and truth and joy like the gospel?

We are all aware of the influence, for good or bad, of prominent people, whether in politics, showbiz or sport. Some of you who are much more into sport than I am will be able to come out with a long list of players whose **behaviour makes their sport look bad**. To take one recent example, I'm thinking of a West Indian bowler whose inappropriate comment was picked up by a microphone somewhere on the pitch. But the other side of the coin is the positive example shown by the England captain, not just for scoring a century, but especially for speaking out so firmly against sexist jibes that have no place in civilised society.

Gabriel suffered consequences for his lapse in the standards expected. **But for us**, far more is at stake than the reputation of a sport. We are **ambassadors for Christ**. When Christians behave badly, what do people think? What sort of behaviour can turn people away from Jesus?

We were pleasantly surprised on holiday when a Christian couple guessed we were probably Christians on their first evening. But the crucial question is this: **would non-Christians have recognised what we stood for?** Or if they did, would our behaviour have put them off? That's certainly a **challenge to me** – and perhaps to others here.

Be united for the gospel

But unity is important too, and it is stressed this week: *one spirit* (v.27) and again in next Sunday's reading: ***having the same love, being one in spirit and of the same mind*** (2.2). Where there is pressure from outside, the church (or a political party for that matter, as we think of all this week's splits) can only be steady if there is strength on the inside, and if people look out for one another. A church that is not united, but is disjointed and distrustful of one another, will inevitably be weak in the face of opposition.

Paul's words about unity **link with our Gospel reading**. In Jesus' prayer to his Father shortly before his arrest, our Saviour is uplifting not just his first disciples but also *those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you*. (John 17.20f)

So, like the Philippians, we must aim for a **spiritual unity in Christ** (Gal. 3.24-28), expressed by a common understanding of the "Gospel of Christ" and by a commitment to working together for the sake of that same Gospel (v.27). Such unity is not only a 'worthy' lifestyle choice: unity gives them the strength to

continue to 'stand' ***without being frightened in any way*** (v.28) when external opposition gets too much.

Fight for the gospel

Fighting together for the gospel is **like some kind of team sport**. A hotel dining room in the Canary Islands earlier this month wasn't patronised by the usual typical holidaymakers, but was dominated by groups of young professional cyclists, in their team colours. The likes of Team Sky were starting the season's training for the Tour de France and similar events – perhaps some of them will be in God's own country in May for the Tour de Yorkshire! The wine waiter was almost redundant that evening, as there wasn't a drop of alcohol to be seen on any of the cyclists' tables! They were **working together to win**, not just cycling up and down thousands of metres a day, but also disciplining their bodies. There are **ups and downs in any fight**, quite literally in the case of the Team Sky cyclist (Ben Swift) now in hospital after clipping a rock on a descent.

Are we **as determined and united** in our fight for the gospel, I wonder? We don't race alone; we struggle together as a team. We must never give up or start to say unkind things about one another. If we are to win the race, and the people around us are to know the truth about Jesus, we must stand together.

The Philippians were coping with pressure and opposition, and Paul uses the **language of the battlefield** to encourage them to: *stand firm ... striving together* (v.27)". They must be as solid as an army unit under attack. Yet military language has its limits, as the Government has discovered recently after "gun-ho" comments from some ministers have had repercussions on international trade. Paul does not tell these Christians to be aggressive, simply to **be steady and strong**. If their lifestyle choices truly reflect their commitment of faith they will be able to withstand the external and internal challenges to their communal life

Paul thinks that his **personal example** can help the Philippians to be brave. That is why he has written about his difficulties (vv.12-26). Strength depends on two virtues, on **courage and mutual care**. I keep thinking about a film we thoroughly enjoyed last week: *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*. Anyone here seen it? (Google gives it a 96% approval rating). Courage and mutual care were the two qualities that got the Channel Islanders through the German Occupation.

Suffer for the gospel

Satan and his followers are against the gospel and all who stand up for it. But Paul says **three things to encourage us when we suffer for Jesus**:

- It is a **sign** that we are true Christians. So unity of spirit, mind and purpose proves to an antagonistic world that they will lose out, whereas the believers will be saved (v.28).
- It is a privilege or honour to suffer for Jesus. Suffering for Jesus is **God's good gift** to us, just like our Christian faith! (v.29):
It has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him.
- It is **normal** for all God's people to suffer as they fight for the gospel. Paul, suffering in prison, wants to reassure the believers, many of whom may have felt imprisoned in a dark place (to use Fiona's imagery from last week), that **suffering is OK**: *you are going through the same struggle you saw I had ... and that I still have* (v.30).

Conclusion

The book I referred to at the start is **Primeras Personas**, by a Spanish (Canary Island born) newspaper reporter and writer. I shall never forget Juan Cruz Ruiz for his skill in talking and eating at the same time, during a dinner starting in true Spanish fashion at 10pm and finishing at midnight! But I shall remember him for much more than that. We all know (think Saudi Arabia) that it can be **very dangerous to be a reporter** so his book includes dangers he has faced as an overseas reporter for *El País* newspaper. But strikingly, Juan Cruz emphasises the need for **compromise and reconciliation** and is grateful for the **positive influence** so many people have had on him.

Neither this literary work nor the film about a covert literary society in wartime is specifically Christian, but **both can teach us a thing or two** about suffering in dangerous situations and about the influence people can have on each other. That can be a real **challenge for us to witness for Christ** as we take a real interest in our friends and colleagues.

For Paul, Christianity is both **practical and corporate**: we strive to live it together, whatever the dangers, in humility, service and love. Our model is Jesus Christ himself, and in the chapters and weeks ahead we shall learn more about **living** for Christ, **being united** with Christ, **fighting** for Christ and **suffering** for Christ.