

## The Letter to the Philippians

*The letter to the Philippians is one of the very earliest documents in the New Testament. It is usually dated to around the mid-fifties of the first century: in other words about twenty years after the Crucifixion, and perhaps twenty years before the appearance of Mark's Gospel. Scholars have never doubted that it is actually from the pen of Paul, written during one of his (several!) periods of imprisonment – opinion divides whether this was in Rome or Ephesus. What we do know is that Philippi was one of his favourite churches: the tone of this letter is so warm that it has been known as 'the epistle of joy.' Philippi was a Roman Colony in Northern Greece, and was the first place we know of in Europe to hear and receive the Gospel. The story of Paul's preaching and founding the Church there can be found in Acts 16.*

*A really excellent book to help you read through Philippians is Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters by Tom Wright (SPCK, 2002). (The 'Prison Letters' are usually considered as those to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon).*

### Chapter 1 Overview

Paul begins with his customary greetings to and prayer for the Philippian Church. He founded the Church there, and his overwhelming concern is for its spiritual and moral growth. He writes to reassure them that despite his imprisonment, he is in good heart: paradoxically, his being locked up has resulted in the Gospel being preached even more widely and effectively. He is not frightened by the threat of execution: his sense of Christ is so vivid that he knows death 'is gain' – it will only make that experience richer and fuller. However, he does not think death likely, as surely God still has much work for him to do – not least in helping the Philippian Christians go further.

### Things to Think About

1:6 What is the good work that God/Jesus has begun among the Philippians? It is to produce within them 'a harvest of righteousness' (1:11) – in other words, moral and spiritual renewal. The Christian life is a transformed life, and this comes about above all through love (1:9). Paul's prayer is that the Philippians love for God, Jesus and each other will grow – because when love grows and is aimed at the right things, deep heart change naturally follows.

1:20: 'Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death'... Paul's whole life is become a kind of speaking about Christ. His life *shows* Christ – which is not merely a matter of doing good things, but being filled with the same love that was in Jesus. Paul has a deep sense of Christian life being more than just following the *example* of Jesus: it is less a matter of copying something 'outside' the believer's life, and more as if Jesus were a spring welling up *within* that life. He will spell out precisely what this looks like in Ch.2.

1:21 'Living is Christ, and dying is gain'. For Paul, the whole point of his life is now Jesus – letting Jesus shape him and speak through him, becoming the way in which Jesus now lives and works in the world. Jesus is so much at the centre of everything Paul is that he is able not to fear death – because he knows that the resurrection changes what death means. Far from being disaster it is now but the gateway to an even closer 'being with Christ' (1:23). Yet not fearing it is not *wishing* for it: Paul knows he has a role to play in life and joyfully plays it.

### **Things to Pray About**

1:12-14: pray for our Christian brothers and sisters who are in prison *now* for their faith (Christian Solidarity Worldwide has a useful website with much information). Pray that we may share something of their courage in proclaiming our faith, and in resisting everything that would undermine it.

1:21 'For me, living is Christ, and dying is gain': ask Jesus to be the deepest centre of your life, to live through your thoughts and words and actions. Perhaps think of your own death – does it frighten you? What do you find frightening about it? Ask Jesus for the kind of confidence Paul had.

### **Questions to ponder**

It used to be a regular part of Christian spirituality to contemplate one's own death. Should we be glad that it no longer is?

Paul was imprisoned, and the Church at Philippi also faced opposition – even intimidation (1:28). Is this in any sense true of the Church in England, and what does the answer to that question tell us about our Church?