

Bible Notes: Philippians Chapter 4

Overview

The closing chapter of the letter marks a shift from high octane theology to a more personal, familiar note. Paul appeals for reconciliation between members of the Philippian community, and urges them to contemplate his own example of the Christian life. He praises them for the generosity towards him (they seem to have sent him a gift of financial resources during his imprisonment), while falling over himself to say that he had not been looking for their support.

Things to Think About

‘Let your gentleness be known to everyone’ (4:5) – this of course is from the same man who in 3:14 denounced his opponents as dogs and evil doers, and who in a different bout of the same basic argument said he wished they would go and castrate themselves (Galatians 3:12)! Judging from his letters or the testimony of Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, it doesn’t seem that gentleness was Paul’s most obvious attribute. If this is not a case of hypocrisy or a glaring lack of self-knowledge, perhaps we should conclude that are situations which call for gentleness but also those which call for robust combativeness. The trick is knowing which is which – and having the self-control not to be driven by aggression in those situations which don’t require it. That self-control, Paul implies here, is born in a deep confidence in God and Christ that our most basic needs and interests are actually already safe and secure in Him – we don’t need to win every battle that comes our way (or run to find battles to win) because our ultimate worth and well-being doesn’t have to be proved or established by us. It is *given to us* by God.

Some would say humility was also not among Paul’s most obvious characteristics! Isn’t it stunning that he can follow the advice of 4:8 to contemplate whatever is good and excellent with 4:9 ‘keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me’. There’s no reason to restrict this to meaning just ‘keep the teaching I gave you’... it’s at least possible that Paul is saying *consider my life, consider everything about me* – and that’s

your template for Christian living. It runs so contrary to much of our standard emphasis upon the fallibility and moral fragility we all experience, but Paul has a confidence that actually, yes, he really has been changed in Christ. He has become more like Jesus (along the lines of Ch.2) and if people want to know what a Christ-shaped life looks like, they should look at him. It chimes with what he urges his young colleague Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:16: 'watch your life and doctrine closely – it will save you, and those who hear you.' In other words, it is not just what Christians teach that matters, but who and how they are: the Gospel should be scored into everything about their character. And yet, Paul would also be realistic enough to say that though there is certainly moral transformation in the Christian life, it would be folly to expect moral perfection this side of the kingdom. 'We hold these treasures in clay jars' (2 Corinthians 4:7): for now, though moral transformation is real, so is failure and weakness. What matters ultimately is not the moral performance of the Christian, but their union with Jesus: he is the strong one, and whatever strength we have flows from him (Philippians 4:13)

The emphasis in 4:10-19 upon the financial support the Philippian church is giving Paul is worth noting. Do we, whether personally or as part of the parish, view it as our responsibility to offer this kind of help to those engaged in mission and evangelism elsewhere (and especially for those suffering on that account)? We often grumble a little about the amount that the Diocese requires from the parish as the 'parish share' – around £102,000 this year! But it is worth remembering that most of that money is enabling there not just to be a vicar here, but in many other communities that would struggle to pay for their own. Perhaps we should also consider whether some of our annual collective giving should be earmarked, explicitly, for the 'apostolic' work of missionaries at home and abroad and not just for general charitable purposes? And what about our own personal giving, beyond that done through the church? The thing to be clear on is that what we do with our money is among the clearest indication of whether 'the mind of Christ' Paul spoke of in Chapter 2 is really at work within us. At root, are our lives about sharing or hoarding? The best clue is our bank statement. In the end, money and mysticism go together.

We're at the end of Philippians now. One final suggestion: why not try learning some of it off by heart – say 2:5-11, or 3:7-11; 4:4-9? There are few better ways of embedding it in your heart and life. Next week, we go to the Old Testament and the prophet Micah.