

Living is Christ, Dying is Gain

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service on Sunday the 13th of April 1997.

It is Dr. Paul Barker preaching from Philippians 1 verses 12 to 30. The sermon is entitled Living is Christ, Dying is Gain.

Our Father, we pray that your word will take deep root in our lives and bear much fruit for your glory. Amen. Well, and how's it going at Holy Trinity, people ask? How do you like it?

You've been there a year now. How's the parish going? Well, how should I answer that sort of question? How do you assess how a parish is going?

My grandmother says to me, well, so long as you're enjoying yourself, that's what matters. Well, on that score, I guess things are going all right. But can you imagine my grandmother speaking to St. Paul?

[1 : 12] He's in prison falsely. He's facing a possible death. He's been under house arrest or imprisonment for over two years. Firstly in Jerusalem, then Caesarea on the Israeli coast and then in Rome.

So long as you enjoy yourself, seems to be a little bit flat if my grandmother was speaking to him. Indeed, it seems that he's failed. He's the preacher who's shackled and for many they would have thought the gospel had been stifled.

Possibly the Philippians, the people of Philippi, to whom Paul is writing, were rather discouraged by the fact that the person who converted them, who began the church in Philippi ten years before, is now under arrest and seems to be silenced by the Roman authorities.

Maybe they were discouraged by that and felt that the gospel was a failure. So Paul in this letter takes the time to tell them how he is and how he's going. And ironically enough, he's full of joy.

We may not say he's enjoying himself, but nonetheless he rejoices. The Philippians would have known that he had been arrested falsely in Jerusalem on a trumped up charge of taking a Gentile into the Jewish part of the temple.

[2 : 27] It was untrue. And yet Paul can say in verse 12, I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel. A false charge, Paul in prison in Jerusalem.

And then the Philippians would know that he was taken then to Caesarea. And under successive Roman procurators, he was kept for over two years in prison in Caesarea. But Paul can say, I want you to know, beloved, that what's happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel.

Paul, when he was taken to Rome, was put under house arrest there.

A guard kept by him, probably chained to him 24 hours a day. But I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel.

How can that be? How can the shackling of the preacher missionary actually help to spread the gospel? Because, Paul goes on to say, it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ.

[3 : 58] Paul preaches to the captive guards. He's not the captive they are. They're the ones who are chained to him. You imagine being on roster duty to mine Paul.

Oh no, not hearing the gospel all over again. Well, we don't know whether many were converted or not. But you could imagine doing their eight-hour shifts, day after day, week after week, month after month, that the guards would have understood what the gospel is.

Paul says, well, now you're chained to me, you're a captive audience, let me tell you why I'm here. I'm not a prisoner because I'm a murderer or a thief. I'm a prisoner because I believe in Jesus Christ who died for my sins, through whom my sins are forgiven.

And not only did he die, but he rose from the dead. He's alive. It's amazing, a person rising from the dead. And what more than that, one day he's coming back to judge the world. And if you are going to be ready for that judgment day, then you ought to turn to Jesus Christ and place your faith and trust in him.

Maybe some guards were converted. We're not told that. But the point for Paul is that they heard the gospel. The gospel spread. And no doubt the guards told other guards, we've got this prisoner here who tells us that he's in prison, not because he's a murderer or something else, but because he believes that this Jew rose from the dead and is coming to judge the world and we ought to put our faith and trust in him.

[5 : 15] And so the gospel spread. Through all these pagan Roman guards and around about. And Paul rejoices because of that. But more than that, not only did the gospel spread among these pagan Roman guards.

He goes on to say in verse 14, and most of the brothers and sisters, that is talking about Christians, most of the Christians in Rome, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

Two things about that. The Christians in Rome, the Roman church, has been encouraged in their confidence in God because Paul is in prison for his Christian faith.

Somehow they've taken courage from the fact that God is right, that the gospel is true, and that Paul is prepared to even die for it if need be. And so they've been encouraged by that in their own Christian faith and walk.

But more than that, Paul's example of preaching the gospel has triggered them into doing the same. You may remember the film Dead Poets Society.

[6 : 20] At the very end of the film, these timid secondary school students stand up to salute their sacked teacher. One boy, the timid one, stands on his desk and salutes him, Captain, my captain.

It was an act of some courage in face of the headmaster who'd sacked the teacher. But if you know that moving scene, other boys stand on their desk and do the same thing. But it took one to go first, one example of courage, to give courage to the others.

So with Paul, his example of preaching the gospel has spurred the others to do the same. That one example of courage has encouraged other people to follow suit and to preach the gospel with boldness and without fear, we're told, around Rome.

So Paul rejoices. Not only has he spread the gospel to others, the guards, the Romans, but the Roman church has taken encouragement and they've spread the gospel to their friends, their families, their work colleagues, their neighbours, whoever else with whom they have contact.

So Paul rejoices. You see, what matters for Paul is not his comfort, not his ease, not even his justice, something for which we would fight and strive with every ounce left in us if it were us, if we were accused falsely.

[7 : 39] No, Paul takes that on his chin because he sees that even in the false justice, the false imprisonment, there is opportunity to tell other people about the Lord Jesus Christ and that's what matters for Paul.

Well, maybe you think, oh, he's a bit of a fanatic, this Paul. It's all right for him, but my religion's sort of a little bit more private and a little bit more restrained. But it seems to me we're meant to learn a very important example from him about what our concerns should be.

When we're suffering or falsely or whatever the situation, rather than bemoaning the fact, why me? Why should this happen to me? What opportunities are there for us to give glory to our Lord Jesus Christ?

What opportunities are there for us to tell others about our faith? It's unlikely that in our day and age, at least at this stage of our history, that we will be thrown in prison for our faith.

But nonetheless, we all face many opportunities, more even than Paul, who was in chains faced, for sharing the gospel with others. Whether it's our spouse, our children, our parents, whether it's our work colleagues, those we go walking with, those that we're in a book club with, those that we run with or jog with or play sport with, those in probus or other groups with.

[8 : 57] We have plenty and plenty of opportunities to, without offence, share the gospel with other people, to bear testimony to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, risen from the dead.

Paul goes on in the next paragraph to say something that is very odd. It doesn't seem to fit well with other things we know in the Bible. The Bible consistently says that motives are important, that not only what we do should be right, but why we do it ought to be right as well.

And yet here, Paul at one level seems to be going against that standard of teaching. Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill.

These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defence of the gospel. The others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment.

But what does it matter? Well, that's an striking comment to make. Two groups of people who are preaching Christ, one faithfully out of love and goodwill in support of Paul, but the others out of envy and rivalry or partisanship.

[10 : 19] Paul does not condone that group's motives, their envy, their rivalry, their partisanship, or however else we understand it. Those motives are always wrong in the Bible.

But Paul also recognises that these are not people who are preaching a false gospel. These are not people who are preaching about Jesus something other than what is true. They're not the equivalent of the Jehovah's Witnesses or the Mormons, for whom Paul always has condemnatory statements to make, because he will not tolerate, indeed the whole Bible will not tolerate, anything that is away from the truth.

Rather, these people, even despite their envy and rivalry, nonetheless are preaching a genuine gospel about Jesus Christ. The difficulty for us is to imagine, well, how can that be?

How can people preach the truth and yet do so out of envy or rivalry or partisanship? Possibly these are people who are threatened by Paul.

Maybe they're jealous of his high public profile, the prestige or reputation he brings. Maybe these were leaders of the Roman Church who'd faithfully ministered to Christians in Rome and then all of a sudden Paul arrives in Rome.

[11 : 34] And all the attention of the Christians is directed to Paul. And so they preach with more zeal, but out of envy and rivalry for Paul, trying to establish themselves as somehow not so much in opposition to what he says, but in opposition to him as a person.

Maybe they're people whose popularity has waned now that Paul has arrived in Rome. Maybe they go about suggesting that Paul's in prison for his own fault. It was his own stupidity or folly that took him there.

We do not know for certain. But we do know that what they preached was true, but they did so for the wrong motives. There's a very important warning, I think, here, especially for Christian ministers.

So I preach to myself more than I do to the rest of you. But personal following and popularity is always a temptation for those in Christian public ministry.

Jealousy of others is always a temptation for those in Christian ministry. I think it's why so many move from the gospel, that they find others who preach the gospel draw the crowds, and so they have to have something different in order to draw a following.

[12 : 54] I think it's why so many break down or are under stress in ministry, because of the pressure that others who are more popular have. I think it's also why the church is so divided, because Christian ministers see themselves so often in competition with each other, whether within the one denomination or across denominations.

I think it's why Christian leaders struggle to have real fellowship with other Christian leaders, whether within their denomination or in an inter-church type situation.

All of us, whether ministers or not, act with mixed motives at times. And it's very hard, I know, as a Christian minister, to preach and minister with a pure motive.

And I pray that God will take away from me the desires, the self-interest and jealousy and rivalry of others so that my ministry will be pure. I pray that God will prevent me from rivalry, jealousy or partisanship.

Paul's response does not carp on their faults or criticise what they're doing. He's very restrained in that.

[14 : 06] He doesn't seek to justify himself, but rather, as he could have done, but rather he subordinates his self-interest for the sake of the gospel.

Because Jesus Christ is being preached, Paul rejoices, even if some motives are wrong. And he goes on to say, I'll continue to rejoice in verse 19.

For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance. Many people wrongly think Paul is praying here and asking for prayer that he'll get out of prison, that he'll be delivered from imprisonment.

And if I were unfairly in prison, then I think I'd be asking prayer to get out as well. But that's not actually what Paul is praying here. The word deliverance is literally the word salvation.

Paul is praying that on the final day when Christ returns to judge, he will receive his salvation and be delivered from God's judgment.

[15 : 12] For Paul, the most important thing is that day of Christ in the future, as we saw last week. the deadline that focuses all his thoughts and consumes his passions. The thing for which his life is directed.

The day when Christ will return and judge the world. And that's more important for Paul than coming out of prison, is that he will be able to stand on that final day.

And he's confident that he'll do so. He's confident that on that day when Christ returns, he will be able to stand before Jesus Christ's judgment throne.

Not in his own strength, not to receive a reward for all his efforts and labours in the mission field, but rather through God's strength. Paul is asking the Philippians to pray for him for strength and he knows that God will answer that prayer by giving him the Holy Spirit here called the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Paul knows that the only way anybody can stand on the judgment day of Christ is through the strength that God himself brings. As we saw last week in that well-known verse, Paul says in verse 6 of this chapter, I know that he who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion on the day of Christ.

[16 : 36] Not that Paul can complete it or the Philippians complete it, but that God himself will bring to completion the work that he has begun. Paul does not want to be ashamed on that day.

He goes on to say it's my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way. That doesn't mean by other people. He doesn't fear that he'll be humiliated before the Romans, judges or guards.

That's not his concern, but rather his concern is standing before God and not being ashamed or humiliated in God's eyes. Paul longs that on that day of Christ there will be no accusation against him that he's missed opportunities to share the gospel.

That he's put self-interest above the interests of others. That he's been ashamed of the gospel in his life. For Paul knows that if we're ashamed of the gospel in this life then Christ will be ashamed of us on the day when he returns.

It's very hard for us to get this right, I think. We crave the approval of other people, whether our spouse, our children, our parents, or our boss at work, or our colleagues, or our congregations.

[17 : 52] It's very easy to seek to win the pleasure of other people. For peer group pressure is not a teenage fad, but something that applies all our lives. But Paul recognised that the only approval that counts, the only approval that lasts for eternity, is the approval of God on the day of Christ.

And that's what Paul longs to receive. That on the day of Christ he'll not be ashamed because God has been at work in him, answering the prayers of the Philippians to keep him and help him persevere in faith.

And if Paul needs the prayers of other people for his perseverance in faith, how much more do we? How much more do we need the prayers of each other that day by day we continue in the faith of Christ to continue to grow in love, abounding and overflowing with knowledge and insight so that we may be pure and blameless on the day of Christ?

If Paul needed prayers for that sort of thing, so do we. And even more. To me, he says, living is Christ and dying is gain.

If ever there was a statement that summed up St Paul, that's it. Verse 21, for to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.

[19 : 15] To live, he explains in the next verse, if I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me. Life for Paul is service of Christ. That's what gives it meaning and purpose.

That's what counts. That's what matters, is to serve Jesus Christ in his life. Paul's faced with two options, not that he can choose, but the two options are to keep on living and therefore be in the service of other people through the gospel or to die and be with Christ.

And that's the one that he prefers, we're told. I do not know which I prefer. I'm hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. It's not that he's got a morbid fascination with death.

It's not that he's depressed like Jonah, the prophet of the Old Testament, who said, I'm much better dead than alive. But rather that he recognised that in death he would be with Christ and that would be perfection, perfect fellowship with our Lord and Saviour.

That would be better. That would be the best thing of anything that could be imagined. Paul recognises that those who die in Christ are with Christ.

[20 : 25] There's no fear in death for him, for Christ has died and risen. He's gone through that path for us and so ought there to be no fear for us. But rather confidence that Christians who die are with Christ now.

For Paul, the idea is to depart and be with Christ. The word has got a military camp type analogy behind it. The idea is of breaking camp, pulling the tent down, wrapping up the tent, putting the tent poles in their bag and stuffing it all in the car boot and heading home.

For Paul, you see, this life is like a temporary tent, a temporary life. But home is where Christ is and that for Paul would be best. But that's his own desire there at work.

Paul does not seek his own desire. Rather, he recognises that for him to live is better. Not for himself, but for other people. So he goes on to say, to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.

So since I'm convinced of this, I know that I'll remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

[21 : 40] Paul's happy to live. He's happy to live because it will bring benefit and fruit to other people, that their faith will progress into maturity. This is unselfishness of Paul, seeking to live not for his own sake, but rather for the sake of others.

How different that is from us. For what motivates most of us to stay alive is probably pleasure. We enjoy living, and that keeps us alive. That's often the main argument in the euthanasia debate, that when there's no pleasure in living, why live?

It's my grandmother's dictum all over again. So long as you enjoy yourself, that's all right. But you see, for Christians, there's a higher motive for living than enjoyment or pleasure, and that is the service of others.

And whatever circumstance we find ourselves in, we can serve others with the gospel. Even in terminal illness and pain, we can serve others for the gospel.

And so like Paul, we ought never to seek death for ourselves and our own selfish desires. That in God's time will come. But rather, we should use this life to its full in the gospel service of other people.

[23 : 01] There's a little rhyme that says, only one life will soon be passed, and only what's done for Christ will last. That's what motivated Paul to living.

It ought to be our motive as well. It was debatable whether Paul would be released from prison or not. He didn't know. He thought he would be because he could see the benefits of it and thought God would honour those benefits.

It's debatable whether Paul was released from prison or not. We don't know. And it doesn't matter. The key for him was the progress of the gospel. And whatever would bring about the progress of the gospel, that was all right for Paul.

But not only was his life to be lived for the gospel, so ought the Philippians' lives as well. Only one thing, he says to them in verse 27, only one thing, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

The thing that characterises that life worthy of the gospel is unity. So that whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I'll know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side, and with one mind contending for the faith of the gospel.

[24 : 18] Unity. One spirit, side by side, one mind. Unity, you see, is a gospel standard. It's not an optional extra in the Christian church.

The gospel is that Christ died for all, bringing reconciliation for all, not only with God, but with each other. So unity is a gospel standard. Ununited. An ununited church or a church of disunity is a denial of Jesus' death.

It not only hinders the gospel, but it dishonours Jesus Christ. Where there is disunity, there is in the end rejection of Jesus' death.

Unity doesn't mean a common mind on everything. It doesn't mean that we'll all be best of friends. But rather it's talking about unity for the gospel. The one priority that should drive us as a church, unifying us and keeping us together.

Paul encourages the Philippians that through their unity and their steadfastness, they may well receive some opposition. But that oughtn't to intimidate them. Opposition indeed can be God-given.

[25 : 33] Indeed, he goes on to say in verse 29 that suffering for the gospel is a privilege because the one who suffered for us and died for us gave us far more than we can ever give him.

So suffering for him ought to be a privilege. Paul recognises that the Philippians may well face what he faces. He knows that Nero is either on the throne or persecution is around the corner.

And so the Philippians are likely to face the same sort of pressure. What about us? One year down the track, how do you see Holy Trinity?

How's it going? Not whether you're enjoying yourself, but how do we answer that question? We assess ourselves not on the basis of numbers, giving, money, not on the basis of how neat and tidy or how full the rosters are, not on the basis of how many activities there are, how many groups are thriving or surviving, nor on the basis of happiness.

But we assess our lives according to the gospel. Does the gospel shape all that we do as a church? Do gospel priorities take precedence over self-interest?

[26 : 58] Or are we a church marked by our selfish complaints because we forget the importance of the gospel? Is it a church where the gospel's preached, not just meaning 8am and 10am on a Sunday morning, but in the lives of everybody who belongs to the church?

Are opportunities being used by members of the church to tell others and bear witness to Jesus Christ? Are people being converted by the gospel, growing by the gospel, coming to maturity through the gospel?

Is there real gospel unity in this church where we put aside personal differences and likes and dislikes for the sake of a unity according to the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Is there perseverance in the faith of Jesus Christ? Steadfastness, standing first, striving side by side, all for the sake of the gospel? To the extent that those things are true here, I give thanks to God for when they occur.

But as Paul prayed for the Philippians and I encourage you to pray for each other last week, so I continue to pray as well that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

[28 : 36] Amen. house and give him two and half together and go through■n Allen and other and Thank you.