

My first sermon of the New Year. What to preach?

Little secret – I find it really difficult choosing what to preach. It's hard when you are visiting another church. But it's harder still in your own church.

In some ways it should be a joy I know. To look at a passage that you feel would be particularly appropriate for a particular time, like New Year, for example; particularly appropriate for a church that you know and love. Maybe it's the pressure of doing that that I find so difficult.

But tonight that is not my worry.

We are working together through Paul's letter to the Philippians and we have come to a passage that could not be more appropriate for a time like today when together we can look forward as a church.

If we were to ask "How should we go forward together as a church this year?" we couldn't choose a better passage to look at.

But..... it doesn't directly answer the question "What we should do this year?".

I say 'directly', because as we look at the passage we'll see that as we think about what the Lord is telling us about what we should be like in this coming year, it will naturally spill over into how we will behave.

If you have your bible open look back to Chapter One.

In Church bibles:

1. Paul's opening greeting
2. Thanksgiving & prayer
3. Paul's chains advance the gospel

Other translations or printings

- 1.
- 2.
3. Paul's joy that Christ is preached
4. Paul's life for Christ
5. Live as citizens of Heaven

1. (whole) Readiness to honour Christ

Generally similar – others - To live is Christ

And so we come to Chapter 2

Chapter 2 v1-11 are really all one piece.

Many people consider v6-11 to be quoting from a well known hymn or a creed said together by Christians in the churches.

It is being used as an illustration, an example and more than that of what the church in Philippi should be like – of what every church should be like.

In the first 4 verses Paul spells it out to the church in Philippi – and so the Lord is spelling it out to us.

You see the church in Philippi was close to Paul's heart. We have seen before how dear they were to him. He speaks so warmly of them, he longs for them.

But the church there is not perfect. There seem to be some issues. In chapter 4 we will read about 2 women who have such a disagreement that it has come to Paul's attention far away though he was. Many commentators believe that to have been just one example of a wider problem of disagreements in the church.

That wouldn't be very surprising for us would it?

There are always disagreements in church.

In some ways I am not sorry that it's true.

It's lovely to be in a church where we are of a wide age range, a diversity of backgrounds, different in many ways. But that means that we will see many things in different ways.

Most of those things won't be key to the life of the church. Things like:
what colour to paint this or that
or what make of tea we should serve.

But then there will also be differences of opinion over more important things:
How we should approach certain ministries of the church
Whether we should be doing particular ministries of the church

But then there are even bigger things – the things that are at the heart of what we believe – matters of doctrine or theology.

Let's remember that Paul has already said to the church in 1v27 onwards

READ 1v27-30

He talks about them standing firm in the face of opposition. And without doubt the society in which we live is becoming more opposed to the good news of Jesus.

As individuals we may have face more opposition when we were first saved.

Almost certainly the church as a whole in the country is facing more opposition than in our younger years.

And that means struggles and suffering for the people of God in this world.

Yet whatever happens, Paul says, live out the gospel of Jesus Christ. Make sure that your faith is expressed in your conduct – in how you behave.

And he carries that thought on as we come to Ch2v1 where he says “If you have any encouragement from being united in Christ, ...If any comfort...If any fellowship,... If any tenderness.....”

In each of those cases that ‘if’ is not the if saying ‘I don't know whether this is true’ – it's the if saying ‘because I do know that this is true’

And what amazing things that he does know about his Christian brothers and sisters in Philippi.

There are 4 of these things

The **first** one is that they are united with Christ – perhaps it might be more literally translated as being ‘in Christ’. That is a phrase that we repeatedly come across in the New Testament to describe believers – they are, we are in Christ.

An amazing truth – John Piper - ‘A stupendous reality’ – the phrase united with Christ that the translators have used is only a start at understanding what it means to be ‘in Christ’ – a good start.

To be in Christ is to be united with Him. The best representation of that in human relationships should be the marriage relationship – that is throughout the bible used as an expression of what it should mean to be a Christian.

But to be in Christ is much more so.

A marriage should be a relationship that is not broken in this world – but it will be broken in death. When we are in Christ that will not be broken in this world or through death.

In marriage there should be complete trust and open-ness – but we know that a husband or wife can never be completely perfect in every way – whatever it says on a Valentines Day card.

But in Christ we are united with one who is perfect in every way – who can be trusted, not only because they have the best intentions to be trustworthy, but because in Christ we have one who has all that is necessary, wisdom, power and might - to be perfectly trustworthy.

We could spend hours just looking at what it means to be in Christ – united with Christ – but here we are reminded of, the emphasis is what an encouragement that is.

It is an encouragement in so many ways. It is an encouragement because that which is most important to us in this world and for eternity is certain. If we are in Christ – that will not be changed.

In this world we look for security in so many ways.

- It may be financial and material security. Jobs, pensions, having secure housing, insurance policies – that kind of thing.
- It can be security in relationships – so many ways we can look for that and lose that security.

Those and other securities are uncertain. They rely on frail, sinful people like us.

In Christ we know the security that the world cannot give because it does not depend on us in any way; it does not depend on what happens to us, or what happens around us.

It depends on the Lord Jesus, on what He has done for us.

As we start a New Year what an encouragement that is; to be in Christ, united with Him.

We do not know what the year will hold for us as individuals or the church – but if we are the Lords, regarding our security in Christ, that’s it. No more required.

Whatever comes – **total security in Him**.

But in Christ this security is not some kind of hard, soul-less security – simply the absence of danger.

No – in Christ we know the comfort of God’s love. We can only be ‘in Christ’ because the incarnation is an expression to us of God’s love.

Because God so loved the world He sent His only son.

Lacking comfort in life is not nice. We can do it. But it’s not nice.

Maybe you have had an uncomfortable journey somewhere. An overcrowded train, perhaps; a car journey where you have been squashed in with a full load of people, and a box on your lap. We can bear it – but it's not nice.

There can also be a lack of comfort in being somewhere that you are not appreciated, where people don't care about you, people don't love you. That's so much worse – so much so that it can become unbearable.

The security that we know in Christ is not like that, secure but hard and cold. It is the warmth of being loved. The comfort of home that comes, not from a comfy settee, but from a loving family, and in God a loving Father.

It's the comfort that keeps on despite any material discomfort - the unhappiness, the discomfort that we know in this world because it is not as it was intended to be. It is marred by sin and that affects us in so many ways.

But however this world does affect us – and it will – we can continue in the comfort of God's love.

The 3rd thing that is mentioned that we know if we are in Christ is fellowship or communion with the spirit.

Again these are amazing words. It is not at all unusual for us to very easily slip into unhelpful thinking about the Holy Spirit. We can slip into thinking of him as some kind of power, something a bit like electricity that emanates from The Father and the Son – but not like them.

We are not going to try to fully define the Trinity now – but whilst, of course, the Father, Son and Spirit are each both distinct and yet at the same time together, they are each individually, fully God.

The Holy Spirit is fully God in every way, and yet amazingly, we read here that we are in fellowship with Him.

That word fellowship is a strong word. It is not a picture of people spending some time together, sharing some things together, two separate entities that touch at certain points.

It is a picture of complete togetherness, singularity of purpose – unity.

And this is not some fellowship with another person like us, or some power – it is fellowship, complete togetherness with The Holy Spirit who is God.

It is an amazing truth in itself but it is an amazing truth in its consequence too.

It is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that brings us to salvation but it is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts that enables us to live out our salvation too.

We know that we need the ongoing work of God in our lives. That is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. When we are in Christ we are in fellowship with the Spirit. We can expect to be of one purpose with the Holy Spirit. And we should be very aware if we are not.

The 4th 'If' – the things that Paul knows that they do have is 'tenderness & compassion'.

In some ways this doesn't seem to fit with the other 3 – they all seem to be about God's work in us. This seems to be about our approach to other people – in this case it seems to be about the tenderness of heart and compassion of the Philippians to Paul.

Some people think that instead it means God's tenderness and compassion to the Philippians.

You can argue that it could be one or the other – the meaning in Greek is a little vague.

Is that an accident? Did Paul not know the right words to say? Did the Holy Spirit get a bit vague then as He was inspiring the Apostle Paul in his writing? – Of course not!

Do you remember the parable that Jesus told that is usually called the parable of the unmerciful servant?

One servant is forgiven much by his king – he receives great mercy and compassion but then goes out and shows the opposite to others.

That cannot happen with the tenderness and mercy of God. If we truly receive it in our hearts – we will be changed by the powerful working of the Holy Spirit – the receiving of God's mercy goes hand-in-hand with the showing of God's mercy.

Which brings us to the point of why this is being written down for the Philippians and for us.

The apostle Paul – if he were alive today – would, I am sure have made a great computer programmer.

Here in Philippians 2 he is using an IF – THEN statement which is one of the things – operations – that are used in computer programming all the time.

If one thing is true then the computer has to do something else.

It doesn't work quite the same way with us as Christians though. We are not computers.

But look what we are told – If we know encouragement from being in Christ, comfort for his love, fellowship with the Spirit, tenderness & compassion then do.....

But look. This is not addressed to some set of super Christians.

It does not say if you know total encouragement, complete comfort, perfect fellowship with the Spirit, overflowing tenderness & compassion.

No it is talking to people like you and me;

- who feel discouragement mixed with encouragement,
- we know the comfort of God's love – most of the time
- we know fellowship with the Spirit but not as we would like
- we fail a bit in the tenderness and compassion stakes.

This is not addressed to those who have reached perfection – but to people like us, If you know these things at all, then....

Then

- be likeminded
- Share that same love of God
- Be united in spirit and unity.
- Rather than being self-seeking be other-seeking.

If we are believers, those who have put our faith in the Lord Jesus

We are united with Him, we are in Him – perfect security

We do know the love of God in Jesus – perfect love

We do know fellowship with the Holy Spirit – the power to live out our salvation

We do know the tenderness and compassion of God – and even in the toughest of us that breaks out doesn't it.

And so then we almost have a manifesto of how to look to the future as a church – New Year – or just one day at a time

- Strive to be like-minded
- Strive to have that same love that we know from God.
- Strive for unity in spirit
- Strive for unity in purpose

This is Hard

- open-ness,
- honesty,
- putting other first

are all required of us.

All based on the certainty of

- our security in Christ,
- the love of God,
- the fellowship that we have with the Holy Spirit
- and On the tenderness and compassion that we know from God, that we can share one with another.