

## Pentecost 18: 12 October Philippians 4:1-9 Gentleness

'Beloved', Paul calls his Philippian friends and colleagues, 'beloved', and he invites their care for each other and their rejoicing, and their focus on the God who brings peace, focus on what is good and positive. Paul writes from prison in Rome. 'He 'deals with relations among fellow "staff" by doing theology and pointing to the foundation of spirituality". Loader

This past week our Holy Covenant staff have been on retreat for several days to pray and to reflect on the past year at Holy Covenant, to think about this current time of transition, and to look to the future for Holy Covenant and for ourselves. To begin the retreat we spent time with this passage from Philippians. I think it is a passage which bears much reflection for us and for where we are right now.

Paul begins with commending two women to pull together. These two women have been his colleagues in ministry. Then he goes on to invite rejoicing, remember he is in prison and times are tough but here's urging them, to rejoice in everything and to bring their concerns before God a poignant reminder. Psychology and neuroscience tell us that we what we focus on, we become. If we focus on the negative, on our problems, on our grief, they can consume us. If we focus on God on what is true and beautiful then we grow into that. I am sure I have recounted the story of the grandfather's discussion with his grandson.

A native American grandfather was talking to his grandson about how he felt.

He said 'I feel as if I have two wolves fighting in my heart...

One wolf is the vengeful, angry, violent one.

The other wolf is the loving, peaceful, compassionate one.'

The grandson asked him, 'Which wolf will win the fight?'

The grandfather answered: 'The one I feed.'

Native American Story

Which do you feed?

In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul admonishes the believers to guard their thinking. They are to “fill their minds and meditate on things true, noble...the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse” (Philippians 4:8-9/The Message Version).

Loader:

"Rejoice always", he says. Paul's "always" is not a quantitative assertion of the kind that implies joy in every moment. Joy is never alone. Its companions are pain and fear. At times Paul's letters display more of some than the other. Paul's sense of joy is not the absence of pain or fear, but the presence of Christ, in whom he places his hope and trust. The deep human need to belong, the joy of belonging, is met for Paul in Christ. That unity takes him into pain and death, and, as he often emphasises, leads him over and over again on a journey from death to life, from pain to joy. Sometimes his joy stays alight as a flickering flame amid an oppressive darkness of criticism and downright hate. But it remains and can flare into brightness at relief and change.

What brings it to burn brightly is the knowledge that here and there love breaks through, people are rescued from the negative effects of religion, pagan, Jewish and Christian, and are set free to be loving people. For Paul joy and love belong closely together. For he rejoices at the truth (see 1 Cor 13:6). Here that means he wants the Philippians to let their goodness, their gentleness shine. The focus is outward. For the Lord in whom he wants them to rejoice is the one whose life reached out.

Paul is expecting that Jesus would return soon to this world: "The Lord is near" (4:5). That sounds unreal for us, because we look back over 2000 years and it hasn't happened. It is interesting that Paul does not say this in order to appeal to some spiritually self-interested strategies which people should undertake to make themselves safe. On the contrary, Christ's future coming like his past coming issues in a single invitation: to live in his life in the present.

The exhortation not to worry is interesting, coming from Paul. It hardly means, don't have serious thoughts or don't be anxious. Just look at many of Paul's letters and you will see how involved he was and often how worried he was about what was happening to the people of his churches. It was a quite a burden, as he reminds us in 2 Cor 11:28 (where he uses the same word, "worry"). So Paul is hardly peddling a lifestyle option of the unengaged life of serenity. His spirituality is quite the opposite. But part of his joy is that it keeps him from total despair, the kind of worry that becomes obsessive and self-destructive. An openness to God in prayer keeps him centred - just as it kept Jesus centred in Gethsemane.

When Paul speaks about "peace" in 4:7, we know he is not talking about finding oneness beyond this world and its uncertainties alone. When he speaks of this peace keeping people's hearts and minds, he is almost saying: this will keep you sane! It is neither a disengaged serenity nor an intellectually worked out, solution-focused state of having answers to all the problems. Rather it is a peace that goes beyond the repose of rational resolution and cannot really be achieved by it. Ultimately it is the peace of or from God. That sense of the presence of God, the awareness of oneness with the compassionate one who is engaged "up to the neck" in life, is bigger than our imaginations and our solutions. Paradoxically the love which makes itself vulnerable, the joy which both flares and flickers, and the peace which gives no rest as long as there is injustice and need, all belong together inseparably as the fruit of the spirit. As Paul writes to the Galatians, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace..."

The positive focus continues at the end of our passage. It again becomes personal. Here Paul refers to his own teaching and example. Again Paul integrates theology and practice. Paul is not just advocating the power of positive thinking. This is about more than technique and persuasion. It is about filling one's mind with what Paul sees as the signs of God's life - not so that will feel good, but because this is another way of filling oneself with God's life and so allowing God's life to flow through us to the world around us.

This kind of grounded spirituality lies behind Paul's understanding of peace and, ultimately, also of joy.'

<http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/AEpPentecost18.htm>

I was struck by the small sentence in the reading 'let your gentleness be known to everyone' what a counter cultural thing, 'let your gentleness be known to everyone'. What if we were to do that? To let our gentleness born from our trust in a loving God be known to everyone.

This afternoon I, with a number of women from Holy Covenant, don the hijab for the week. Our intention is to stand alongside those who are being hurt by their fellow Australians because of what they wear. I want to stand in solidarity with them. I want to invite conversation and questions and to live a moment in some others shoes. I intend to do this with the gentle strength of Christ within and surrounding me. We will let you know how we go. We are trying to be gentle symbols of hope and love in a crazy world. There are many ways to do that but this is one simple thing that some of us are doing, like those who handed out flowers at the Muslim festival last week.

Beloved ones, in this time of transition at Holy Covenant I invite you to be of one mind, to focus on God, to be gentle with yourself and with others, and to focus on the strengths of this community which are considerable. I invite you if you are able, to come to the vacancy consultation after the confirmation on Sunday, 26 October from 2 PM, to stand together to express who you are and what are your dreams and the sort of person you would like to lead you into the future. I encourage you to support your clergy appointment board members Evelyn, Rhys and Paula- talk with them, email them, phone them, and above all pray for them and for Matt Brain who will chair the process. Go forward, with confidence that our beloved God is with you and desires the best, desires your growth and well being.

Someone once suggested a simple rule for self care which I offer you at the end of this Mental Health Week: Give to yourself an hour a day, a day a week, a weekend a month, a month a year. This, of course includes your spiritual practices, as well as physical or other self care times.

Today is Elizabethh Sillano's last Sunday. I hand over to her to share some of her recent journey

Elizabeth Sillano:

'Thank you Holy Covenant

Today is my last day at Holy Covenant before I start my holiday trip up to Brisbane, to a new life and adventures. I want to share with you something of the journey I've been on and to say thank you for your company on the way.

A couple of weeks ago I came across this poem by Wendell Berry. It is an apt depiction of my experience over the last few years.

*It may be when we no longer know what to do,  
we have come to our real work,  
and that when we no longer know which way to go, we have begun  
our real journey.*

There was much that spoke to me last year in Lent, but the most significant were these words of T.S. Eliot:

*I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting. Wait  
without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.*

Last year was difficult in many ways and I became deeply depressed. I was in hospital for several weeks in September and October, trying different antidepressants, but came home off all medications because of adverse side effects. The following months were not easy. I was disconnected from myself, from other people, from God.

I had occasional glimpses of the light. Walking to the Cook horse paddocks one day, these words came to me: *I am with you in the*

*darkness. Give me your hand and walk with me.* But the darkness thickened and at times I could not feel the guiding hand. I lost confidence and competence.

Paralysed and lost, loneliness, fear, anxiety my constant companions, is there a way through? All I can do is turn up. So in June I turned up for a cruise with my daughter Laura. She wanted to be with me, knowing that I was not in a good place. We both knew I needed to move. I came home from Brisbane having put a holding deposit on a unit in a retirement village very close to where Laura and her husband live. With the help of my sister and my friend of 43 years, I started the process of selling my house. Early in July my psychiatrist was worried about me and prescribed a different antidepressant which thankfully has not had significant side effects. Late in July things really changed and everything came together. I don't know how it happened, it took me by surprise. While on retreat in Galong I wrote:

*I am home at last,  
desert wanderings complete, autumn fruits greet me.  
Joy has come to me  
in the autumn of my life, unexpected gift.*

Holy Covenant has been a constant for me through this time of transition. I've been able to come through it because you have been here, providing a safe container for me while God worked transformation in me. Thank you for believing in me when I couldn't believe in myself. Thank you for your love and support and prayers. I will carry them with me. You will always have a very special place in my heart and my prayers.

Now I know what it is to rejoice in The Lord and to be anxious for nothing. And I now know the peace of God that passes all understanding in the very depths of my being. Thanks be to God!

Susanna Pain 12 October 2014