

During the summer we will be reading through Philippians in our Sunday services (8a.m. Holy Communion, 10 a.m. All-Age, 6p.m. Evening Service). Please take time to read the letter through at a single sitting.

It's the time of year when we will be at some of the services and not at others; while many of our small groups will take a break. These introductory notes have been produced to give some background, but also to encourage you individually or in households to do your own exploration of the letter during the summer.

If you are away on holiday why not spend a little time after breakfast each day to read a paragraph or two and to reflect on it together.

### **Philippi – the city**

Philippi was named for Philip II (Alexander the Great's father) who re-established and fortified an older city in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. It is about 8 miles from the coast, has freshwater springs and has been a source of gold. It lay on the Via Egnatia, the main trading route between Rome and the East, so would have been a place for traders, like Lydia (see below), to congregate.

Philippi became part of the Roman Empire in 168 BCE; and a Roman colony in 31 BCE following the victory of Octavian in the leadership battles that followed the assassination of Julius

Caesar. Being a Roman colony meant that its citizens held privileges as if they were in Rome – this led to people having a high civic (and probably personal) pride (think of ex-pats in the Raj).

## **Philippi – beginnings of the church**

Paul's first encounter with Philippi can be found in Acts 16.

Following a bust-up between Paul and Barnabas, Paul takes Silas and they set off through Asia Minor (modern day Turkey), collecting a disciple called Timothy on the way. On the journey, doors for ministry keep closing ('kept from preaching by the Holy Spirit' Acts 16:7). Paul and his companions (now including Luke) reach the coast at Troas where Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia (the province in which Philippi lies). In the vision Paul is asked to 'come over and help us' (Acts 16:9).

On arrival in Philippi Paul seeks out a place of prayer; this suggests that there was no synagogue in Philippi. There he meets a merchant woman named Lydia (she dealt with expensive purple cloth – top end, imperial fashion of the time) who becomes a believer. Paul's subsequent encounter is less peaceful. A spirit possessed slave girl (ab)used by her owners was prophesying the future and disrupting Paul's preaching. Paul's calling out of the spirit leads to uproar and results in Paul and Silas in jail.

During the night an earthquake strikes and severely damages the prison. The prisoners stay put – much to the relief of the

jailer. As a result, the jailer believes, and he and his household receive baptism.

The fledgling Christian community in Philippi starts with the immigrant community – Lydia from Thyatira (today Akhisar in Turkey); a jailer – likely to be a retired Roman military officer; and possibly a slave girl (although we are not told what happened to her). From these beginnings a Christian community grew.

### **The letter to ‘God’s holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi’**

The letter is addressed from ‘Paul and Timothy’. It is perhaps the most intimate and joyful of all of Paul’s letters. It is clear that Paul was in prison when he wrote it (1:7; 12ff), although which prison is uncertain. Rome, Corinth, Ephesus and Caesarea all have their supporters; this led an early commentator to write ‘Only God knows where Philippians was written’ (and presumably Paul and Timothy!).

Although there are no sustained themes in the letter (unlike, say, in Galatians), there are several areas that Paul covers. I have listed some of them for further thought below.

#### *Imprisonment and suffering – failure or God’s plan*

Paul’s imprisonment was influencing the members of the Philippian church. The way Paul writes suggests that some have become concerned that this showed a failure either of Paul or of the gospel (1:12). This may have been exacerbated by

preachers who, while preaching a true gospel message, were attempting to elevate themselves above 'that failure Paul' (1:10). Paul addresses these concerns by emphasising that our lives are in God's hands, he will guide; wherever that may lead (as Paul had found in getting to Philippi in the first place). Paul uses the example of his own trust to inspire the community in what they are facing (1:27-30).

Challenge for us: do we see 'persecution' (however mild we may face it in the UK) as a failure of the authorities to protect us or the natural outworking of God at work in us in a hostile world and therefore to be expected?

### *Partnership in the gospel*

There is a close partnership between the Philippian church and Paul's ministry<sup>1</sup>:

- Shared purpose (1:5)
- Shared prayer (1:9, 10)
- Shared people (2:19, 25ff; 4:2)
- Shared practise (3:17)
- Shared pounds (4:10ff)

These marks of partnership have framed our relationships at Christ Church with Kisoro and Kalerwe in Uganda.

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<sup>1</sup> See Phil Groves *Global Partnerships for Local Mission* Cambridge: Grove 2006 for more on these marks; for an exploration of 'sharing pounds' see Brian Wakelin *Money – Master or Servant in Church to Church Partnerships* Cambridge: Grove 2017

Challenge for us: how do we continue to grow our relationships with Kalerwe and Kisoro so that there is a genuine sharing in each other's ministry?

### *Caring for one another*

Although Paul is never explicit, as you read the letter there are hints of underlying tensions between members of the congregation. This shows itself particularly in the call to humility in chapter 2 and the call to help Euodia and Syntyche to be reconciled (4:2).

Was it that the culture of civic pride meant 'me first' in everything? Was it that the busyness of everyday living in a trading hot-spot meant there was no time to 'consider the interests of others'? (2:1-4)

Was it the opposite – people so proud that they were afraid to ask for help?

Challenge for us: how do we work out 2:1-11 in our personal discipleship and our corporate discipleship as 'God's holy people in Christ in Winchester'?

## *Keep on keeping on*

Had the Philippians begun to tire of their walk with God?

2:12, 13 ... ***continue*** to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfil his good purpose. (My emphasis)

3:20 ... our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await a Saviour from there. (They knew what it was to have citizenship 'in Rome' but to be living 'in Philippi')

There is both challenge and encouragement in these verses. A practical way forward is to recognise God's power in our lives, to take things to God in prayer and to focus on the good things from God (4:4-9).

Challenge for us: where have we become tired in our desire to follow Christ and what steps will we take to renew our desire?

## Conclusion

As we prepared the preaching series, we were transfixed by the impact we could have if we lived this out. This is highlighted by Paul in 2:14-16

<sup>14</sup>Do everything without grumbling or arguing, <sup>15</sup>so that you may become blameless and pure, 'children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.' Then you will ***shine among them like stars in the sky*** <sup>16</sup>as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour in vain.

Brian Wakelin

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