

Morningside

1-10-2017

Philippians 2: 5-11.

Dear Paul

That was a brilliant letter you wrote to us! We loved it so much that we read the whole thing out at Sunday morning worship – and then we read it again all the way through the next Sunday. I wouldn't be surprised if they all demand to hear it again next Sunday – for the third time! I can't tell you how many people have borrowed it to take it home, although as you would expect sometimes I have to go home with them so that I can read it to them.

When we listen to your letter we can hear your voice. We picture you marching up and down in that eager, assertive way of yours, and the words just pouring out as poor Silvanus or Tertius or whoever it was tries his hardest to write them down. I suppose your eyes are so bad now that it is very difficult for you to write at all. But, my goodness, you can talk!

As I said, it's a brilliant letter. But it is so special to us in Philippi because it came from you. We will never forget that it was you who brought then message about Jesus the Christ to us, the very first people in Europe to become Christians. Do you realise that it is twelve years ago that you first exploded onto our scene? Goodness knows what you thought of us, hardly a Jew among us. Thank goodness you speak Greek so well and we have the scriptures – all the way from Genesis to Malachi – translated into Greek for us to use.

Exploded is the very word. Your arrival changed life for all of us, even those who have never met you. We tell the stories all the time of your stay here. Dear Lydia has now died and been raised to life; but we can still hear her reminding us that she was you first convert here, the first to be baptised. The tale we keep telling of your time here, of course, is the prison break story. Every time one of the people of God from anywhere visits Philippi that first thing they want to see is "Show us the prison where Paul walked free" It's the same with the children among us. Every Sunday they seem to say "Tell us again the story about Uncle Paul". Of course, we tell them the story of your being thrown in jail and singing hymns and praying there about midnight and the earthquake. No matter how often they hear it they can't wait for the bit where the earthquake breaks down the prison gates – and you don't escape! But the best bit of the story is that we always ask Clement

to tell it: and very dramatically he finishes by saying “I know. I was there. For I was the jailer and on that very day I asked Paul to baptise me and here I am now - a member of the church!”.

So we can't bear to think of you now, locked up in another prison now that you are in Rome. We all remember you in our prayers all the time and we are so very pleased to receive your letter and learn that you are all right. It must be horrible for you, but we all know that you have such courage and the strongest possible faith. We could hardly believe it when we read your letter expecting all sorts of stuff about how terrible it is to be in chains: and what did we read? Your letter says *I will continue to rejoice* - this is you writing from prison, for goodness' sake *I will continue to rejoice for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this (imprisonment) will turn out for my deliverance*. No wonder your letter has given us so much encouragement. At the very end of the letter you tell us *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say Rejoice*. What faith you have, Paul! How much your faith helps ours!

The bit of your letter we've enjoyed most is quite near the beginning. It is the bit where you say *Think about yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought about himself*; which is fair enough – but there are a few folk around who could have said that. It's the bit that follows that really excites us, when you set out just what that means. How did Christ Jesus think of himself? How are we to think about ourselves? The way you tell us is just wonderful. It's so beautiful it's almost like a hymn: quite a few of us are saying that it says what we all believe about Jesus, but we could not have put it into words like you do.

It's the whole movement of the thing which is so beautiful. The way you write about it you can feel the movement of the whole thing: you can feel it – it's almost as if you are singing. Your song starts in the highest of heights, Jesus Christ in equal status with God. He chooses to empty himself coming among us, becoming human; and when among us he moves lower and lower, as low as he can, taking on himself the form of a slave. He claimed no special privileges: instead he lived a selfless obedient life, and died a selfless obedient death.

Then, because of that, the movement now goes the other way: because of his obedient, selfless life and his obedient, selfless death, God raised him to the heights, in honour and glory high above everything and everyone: so that

everything and everyone will bow in worship before this Jesus Christ, and call out in praise that he is the Master of all, to the glorious honour of God the Father. When we heard it read out quite a few of us were weeping at the wonder and the beauty of what you wrote. And we understood why you began that part by saying *Think about yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought about himself*

Now let me tell you about the very exciting thing that happened at our service last Sunday. It was a real shock to these two old troublemakers Euodia and Syntyche when they heard you mentioning them in the letter. You know what they are like and you certainly had your troubles with them when you were here – with all their moaning and quarreling. As I said, they were shocked when you named them and their quarrels so pointedly in the letter: and that first Sunday they went home with their tails between their legs. But it was like a miracle the next Sunday.

Suddenly the two of them strode out into the middle of the congregation and said they wanted to make an announcement. They told us that they had been talking together all week, and they had been talking about that bit in your letter where you said *Think about yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought about himself*. They announced that they were thoroughly ashamed of their own behaviour over a long time; and they wanted the whole congregation to know – and they wanted God to know – that they were going to be different people from now on. No more moaning. No more quarreling. And there and then, in front of the whole congregation, they embraced each other. We were stunned. Euodia and Syntyche! Embracing each other! The whole congregation prayed for them there and then: and then we all burst into applause!

You see what an effect your letter to us Philippians has had already, my dear Paul. I wouldn't be surprised if people were still reading it months from now, or even for a few years to come.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.