

NAURC Worship @ Ipswich Rd

Sunday 11th October 2020

Reading: Philippians 4: 1-9

⁴ Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends!

² I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³ Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Sermon: Philippians 4: 1-9

Team work

> Teamwork. It's a very well-worn phrase in almost any business situation these days and appears in so many guises at training sessions – I too am groaning inwardly at all those pointless exercises like the ones that were a standard feature in the selection weekends for candidates for ministry.

> The exercise Pauline's group was given was to try and transport a container of nuclear material (water in a plastic cup) with some newspapers without spilling any – or some such daft idea. So, there is a standing joke in our household now: if ever we have a nuclear disaster, call for a URC minister and give them a rolled up newspaper!!!

> The exercise on my course was to make a team poster from old greeting cards. We completed the task quickly and turned to the secondary task: to make up a team song. Then my daft sense of humour got involved and we made up a song to the tune of 'Bob the Builder'. When we performed it to the assessment they all ended up falling about laughing – so I guess it did the trick!

> I guess that in business, teamwork is a good way to improve efficiency – which is ultimately about market competitiveness. The news agency I worked for as a

photographer was called News Team essential in such a competitive environment.

> As a sports' fan I was also deeply into teams – either supporting football and cricket teams or playing in badminton teams, which was always hugely competitive. Our village team of Arley in North Warwickshire was very tight-knit and we even had complaints against us for cheering each other on in matches!

> I know that Rick is a very enthusiastic Badminton player and also a devoted Gunners supporter (Arsenal FC) – and several others are Canary fans – anyone been, or are, a member of other teams?

> Working together for a common goal is a great thing, and it often produces deep bonds of friendship – but can also lead to some nasty fallouts if a team member is seen as not pulling their weight.

> On the whole, teamwork is a great idea – something I try to encourage at church too. And there is plenty of encouragement in the Bible about being together, especially in Paul's letters as he often wrote to defuse disagreements in the churches he founded. Philippians is just such an example.

> When I looked afresh at today's text, the importance of those working with Paul in his missionary work just leapt off the page at me. First to be mentioned are two women - Euodia and Syntyche – and then another member of 'team Paul' whose name can be found in the footnotes as "Syzygus" (however you pronounce it?!). Paul goes on to write; "they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life."

> We tend to think of Paul as getting all the credit, but there was a whole team involved in this pioneering mission that Jesus had handed onto them – and in prominent positions of leadership were women.

> Many a sermon has been preached on the basis of inflating a difference of view between Euodia and Syntyche into a full-blown row – which, in my opinion is not merited by the text.

> I think Paul is urging them to find common ground for the sake of Christ's church and that's all – we all have differences of opinion every so often – but usually those can be put to rest for the common good (though I do have experience of just how badly damaging not doing so can be and, no I'm not referring to any churches in Norwich).

> Whilst researching this sermon I found a fascinating article about Euodia and Syntyche by Robert Hull that, after a thorough examination of viewpoints comes to this conclusion:

"The value of these studies has been to draw attention to recurring emphases on unity, humility, and selflessness in the letter, such that Paul's entreaty to the two women may be coherently related to a central theme, rather than based on a personal "feud" between the two."

> So, well done 'Team Paul' – hold together 'Team Jesus' – that is the message from the first three verses. But then Paul seems to change the subject – rather than

heading off into – we must win this fight against the pagans and forces of evil sort of pep-talk – he actually says; “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.”

> ‘Let your gentleness be known’ – that’s no good - letting the competition know your gentle side – what’s going on?

> I think that the togetherness of being a church community is totally different from the aim of beating the opposition in any other team.

> I think what Paul is saying here is that the goal we aim for is not ‘winning’ but seeking the joy and peace that God gives.

> And the joy we seek as Christians together is quite different from the joy we may get elsewhere – when a goal can lead to terrific celebrations and euphoria – that can then be short-lived when the opposition then scores a hat-trick.

> Look back at what Paul writes: “Rejoice in the Lord.” Our joy and peace is to be found in God, and this is quite different from just feeling happy when something goes our way.

> As Holly Hearon an American prof of New Testament writes in her commentary on this passage:

“Philippians 4:4-7 offers a helpful framework for exploring “joy” and “peace” in relation to the life of faith. Although the verses are grammatically structured as independent clauses, they are thematically inter-related. Considered as a whole, they suggest that the substance of joy and peace is found not so much in the emotions they evoke, as in the attitudes, behaviours, and relationships in which they are grounded.”

> It is our aim, as church, to seek together that sense of *joy* and *peace* that are gifts from God – the peace of God that is beyond all understanding. This is something that forms deep within us – it’s that sense of knowing that we are connected with God, through Jesus – and thus connected with each other at a profound level that will see us through all the ups and downs of life – the moments of elation and desolation and all points in between.

> I appreciate that this sounds a bit utopian and we are all involved in real life – and part of that is having to negotiate our way around differences. As Hearon says;

“each of us has a role to play in creating the supportive relationships that are the foundation of “joy” and a cause for “rejoicing.”

> That is why we are together in our churches – to keep working at those mutually supportive relationships and help each other toward exploring ever further into the inexhaustible wonder of God’s love, joy and peace.

> This will bring us through even the most testing times as Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans:

“Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all day long;

we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.’

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (8: 35-39)

> There is a sense of having to battle sometimes and then we need that mutual support more than ever – but let us remember our aim – it’s not about winning a victory – it’s about nurturing the continuing relationship with our creator who we know in the person of Jesus and mediated through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

> At the root of all this is our choice – how we choose to behave and react. Will we use our choices and our power to work together? Sometimes that will involve vulnerability in laying aside our power. We can choose not to stick to our guns in an argument if we can see that it would benefit the common good of the community.

> We can also choose not to be tough all the time, but to drop our defences to allow someone else to help – especially testing times.

> I hope that what I am sharing with you may have the same effect that it has had for me when thinking this through that even when certain aspects of church organisation and other wider events drive you to despair – that actually what matters more than anything else is being together and continuing together to explore and be held up by the gift of God’s peace – and that produces a sort of deep assurance – call it joy if you will – and that’s a cause to rejoice! Amen