

Partners in Christ

Series: Philippians

Date: 27 July 2025, 6th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Philippians 1.1-11 + 2.19-30; Proverbs 3.13-20; John 15:1-8

How many of you still write letters to friends and relations? In this world of TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat - some of you probably don't even know what those are! - Social Media and instant communication, letter writing is a lost art. I thought a lot about friendship at uni. I had a particular friend, Andrew, with whom I studied. We enjoyed spending most of our waking hours together when we weren't studying. I read Cicero's letters to his friends and his treatise *On Friendship*, whose main characters were Laelius and Scipio and in the dedications page of my honours thesis I compared Andrew's and my friendship to Laelius and Scipio.

After uni we drifted apart. He eventually went to do a PhD in Oxford and I stayed in Sydney to study theology. For all the distance I still treasure our friendship and the memory of our intimacy and most weeks I feel a pang of longing for his company.

Today we're starting a new series studying the book of Philippians, or rather the apostle Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. Of all Paul's letters this letter is his most affectionate. In 1.8 Paul writes, *God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus*. This is a letter not just from Paul the absent pastor to his flock, it's a letter of real friendship.

This morning will be something of an introduction to the letter and its main themes. But we'll also be looking over the shoulder as it were into the relationship between Paul and this church. For all of us, whether you're a Christian or not, friendship is a really important topic and one much neglected today. Nearly all the stories of relationships that our culture tells are romantic and the message seems to be that the only deep intimacy we can have is sexual. Yet we all need friends. And friendship is there long before and long after the drive for sex. We can only scratch the surface but I hope that we'll glean some wisdom on how we can do relationships both inside and outside church, some tips on friendship, if you like.

First, though, a bit of background to the letter. The city of Philippi was situated in northern Greece, or Macedonia as it was called, on the Ignatian Way - the main East-West road from Italy through Greece to Asia. Acts 16 names it the leading city in the region. The city was named after Philip of Macedon, Alexander the Great's father. It had come under Roman control in 168BC. In 42BC the city witnessed one of the largest battles in antiquity, between Brutus and Cassius, Julius Caesar's assassins, and his successors, Octavian and Mark Antony. After their victory in 42, and again after his victory over Antony in 30BC, Octavian, who we know as the emperor Augustus, settled large numbers of Roman soldiers at Philippi - refounding it as a Roman colony. The Philippians were Roman citizens. They spoke Latin, the language of Rome, and Greek for trading.

Philippi was not just a significant place in Roman history it was also a significant place in church history. In AD49 Philippi was the site of the first European converts to Christianity and the site of the first European church. We are all in many ways their spiritual descendents. We actually meet quite a number of people from the church in Philippi in the New Testament. From the book of Acts we read about Lydia, a merchant who traded expensive purple cloth. She's the first to convert and then others from her household join her and the church meets in her house. Next there's a girl from the other end of the social spectrum: a slave who before coming to Christ had told the future through the evil spirit which possessed her. Then there's the working class jailer and his household who come to faith after Paul and his companions refuse to escape prison after an earthquake breaks their chains. In the letter itself we meet 2 more women, Euodia and Syntyche, Greek women, as well as Clement, a Roman, all three Paul calls co-workers.

On Paul's side of things Silas and Luke (the writer of the Gospel) are with him when he plants the church in Philippi. In this letter, Paul writes with Timothy - whom he hopes to send to them soon. Paul speaks of Timothy in affectionate terms - *as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel*. Then there's Epaphroditus, and we learn in 2.25, that the Philippian church sent him to care for Paul. As you can see, there's a pretty rich canvas of relationships on display in this letter. And one of the key themes that comes through the letter are these relationships.

After his greeting in verse 1-2, Paul tells the Philippians of his prayers and this is how he begins:

I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

The key word which Paul uses to describe his relationship with the Philippian church is partnership. This is the Greek word *koinonia*, from which we get English words like *community, communion, communication, common*. Elsewhere the word is translated as fellowship, participation or sharing. *Koinonia*, communion, sharing, is always a sharing in something. The word occurs 6 times in Philippians and each refers to something different, but they are all related. Here in 1.5 - the sharing or communion in the gospel. In 1.7 sharing in the grace of God. In 2.1 sharing in the Holy Spirit. In 3.10 sharing in the sufferings of Christ. In 4.14 sharing in troubles and In 4.15 sharing in the matter of giving and receiving. These 6 pictures of sharing or communion or participation give a snapshot of the key themes of the letter and the relationship between Paul and this church.

First - they share in the Gospel, they are partners in the gospel. It's the good news about Jesus that began their relationship. It's the basis for their ongoing relationship. What else could unite and keep this diverse group of people together? People coming from different social and economic classes, different ethnic and racial groups, different genders: they all share in this one thing, the good news of Christ. And this sharing even overcomes the barriers of geography so that in 1.7 Paul can say that they have this communion or fellowship

- because they all share in the grace of God. You see God's grace in Christ, his free acceptance through Christ is something that has the power to unite utterly diverse people without erasing who they are. This is God's diversity and inclusion policy. It's one of the things that I love to see in our diversity here at St George's.

Second - Paul and the Philippian Christians (and us too!) **share in the Holy Spirit.**

The Spirit is God's presence and power with us and in us as God's people. He's the one who makes God's grace real to us. He's the one who takes Christ's work on the cross in dying for our sins and makes that real in our hearts, so that we don't just know that Christ died for sin, but that he died for *my* sin. And we don't just know that God is love, but that he loves *me*. The Spirit unites us to God and to each other. This is why we say in the creed that we believe in the *communion of saints*. What we mean by that is we are united with other Christians throughout space and time. We're united with the Durdins in Cambodia. We're united with our sisters and brothers in the slums of Nairobi, who are starving in Gaza, who face imprisonment and death in Iran for Jesus' sake. We're united with Paul himself, and the Christians to whom he wrote this letter.

The Spirit is also the one who is at work in us to transform us to be like Christ: That messy and hard work of saying "no" to self and "yes" to God.

There are several moments in this letter where Paul talks about the dynamic between what's sometimes called God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Does God do stuff or do we do stuff? The answer Paul gives is yes. So in 1.6 Paul says that he prays with joy because of their *koinonia*, their partnership in the Gospel from the first day until now, *being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

God does this work through his Spirit. The Spirit is the one who brings divine and human action together. In making us more like Christ he makes us more truly human. He helps us to be the people God has made us to be. The 4th century theologian Basil of Caesarea speaks of how God as the source of all being is one and he creates through the Son and perfects through the Spirit.¹ By this he means that the Spirit brings things to their true end or goal, or in Paul's words - to *completion*.

This verse is a great comfort. God doesn't do half jobs. He finishes what he starts. He is not finished with *you*. What he has started he will complete. If you're a follower of Jesus, if you've turned to him in repentance, if you trust him for your life, then he will hold on to you and not let you go.

This letter then has some very helpful instructions for us on how to live as God's people as we wait for that completion and oriented towards that completion when Christ returns.

¹ Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, 16.18

Third, in 3.10 and 4.14 Paul speaks of **sharing in suffering** and troubles. Paul links his own suffering and that of the Christians in Philippi to the sufferings of Christ himself. This letter teaches us about how we can live in the face of suffering and opposition, which will come because we share in Christ. You cannot have Jesus without suffering.

And **fourth**, the church in Philippi **shares with Paul in the matter of giving and receiving**. Their partnership in the gospel, the communion in Christ between Paul and this church translates into a concrete sharing of material resources. Paul frames their care and support for each other as a tangible expression of the relationship they share.

We'll look more at this when we get to the end of the letter, but for the moment, we can ask the question - what holds these different takes on sharing together? The answer is Christ. It's the good news of Christ that has brought them and us into relationship. It's the Spirit of Christ whom we share in and are united by and who is at work to bring us to the future God has for us. It's only as we understand themselves in relation to Christ's sufferings that we can make sense of our own suffering. It's our sharing in Christ that issues in material care and support for each other. It's all about Jesus. The whole letter orbits around Jesus. Our relationship orbits around Jesus. Paul's words in this letter on how to navigate life centre on Jesus. It's all about Jesus.

The question for you and for me is, is your life all about Jesus? Is Jesus at the centre of your relationships and how you conduct them? Is he at the centre of how you use your money? Is he at the centre of how you approach church? Is he at the centre of how you deal with suffering and opposition?

I've tried to show how making Christ the centre doesn't undermine our own individuality. Nor does it erase the differences between us. Rather it's as we share in Christ that we find ourselves and we find each other. He is that mysterious third element that if we let him, if we give him space, he will enable all our relationships to flourish.

This is, I suggest, where Paul finishes his opening prayer for the Philippians in 1.9-11. And we might take it as a prayer for ourselves too. We've spoken this morning about sharing, communion, affection. All these things are part and parcel of love. And this, the Scriptures say, is to be our basic orientation to the world. It's as we grow in this that we can at the very least be good friends. What Paul prays for is that our love may be one of understanding and wisdom. That our love may grow more and more in this, because then we will be able to discern what is good and beautiful and true. But knowledge is not an end in itself, love orients knowledge to action. And so Paul prays for fruit - not just in our actions, how we live, but also for the impact that has on others for good. And this too, as in all things, comes through Jesus Christ to the glory of God.

Amen.

