

PHIL 4.6-7: A PEACEFUL BLESSING

[Chelmsford 5 July 2009]

Every funeral service I conduct ends with the blessing: "*May the peace of God, which is beyond our utmost understanding and of far more worth than human reasoning, keep guard over your hearts and thoughts, through Christ Jesus our Lord*".

It's a wonderfully re-assuring blessing for those who grieve.

But it's also a wonderfully encouraging blessing for people at every stage of life – and not least for people who have brought their baby for a service of thanksgiving, dedication, and blessing!

But rather than just look at the blessing itself, I want to put it in its context.

Paul writing to the church at Philippi says: "**Don't worry about anything, but in all your prayers ask God for what you need, always asking him with a thankful heart. And God's peace, which is far beyond human understanding, will keep your hearts & minds safe in union with Christ Jesus**" (Phil 4.6-7)

Don't worry - writes Paul

I wonder, Ruth & James, have you got any worries?

- Are you concerned for Harry – how will he cope with all the challenges of life?
- Or maybe you are concerned for yourselves: how will we cope with the challenge of parenthood?

Certainly as I look over this morning's congregation, I see all kinds of worries represented here:

- Some of you are worried about keeping your jobs
- Others are worried about your savings – how will I cope with interest rates so low?
- I guess that some young people are worried about how they did in their exams – will I have passed?
- Others might be worrying about the health of a loved one.

When we stop and think about it - if we dare - there seems to be no end to our worries and anxieties. Germaine Greer, the Australian feminist writer, once said: "*Probably the only place where a man can feel really secure is in a maximum security prison, except for the imminent threat of release*"

Yet here Paul is calmly advising us "**not to worry**".

- Our first instinctive reaction might well be: this man doesn't know what he is talking about. He hasn't got a clue about the pressures of 21C life. What's more, it's OK for him, when he hasn't got a wife & kids to worry about.
- Perhaps some of the Philippians, whom Paul is here addressing, felt like that. "**Don't worry**". Good gracious! It needed strong nerves to live the Christian life in Philippi. It was like living on the edge of a volcano. Persecution was in the air. The atmosphere was tense with hostility. And yet Paul you say "**Don't worry**"!

It's a bit like a doctor telling one of his patients "*Don't have high blood pressure*".

How ridiculous! Nobody can lower his or her blood pressure by will power.

People suffering from blood pressure need practical help, they need treatment, they need a prescription for pills to lower their blood pressure.

But look again. Paul doesn't simply tell us not to worry - but he writes out a **prescription**, as it were, to deal with our anxieties & concerns.

1. TELL GOD

"Don't worry about anything, but in all your prayers ask God for what you need".
Peterson: ***"Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns"***

In the words of a saint of old: *"Anxiety and prayer are more opposed to each other than fire and water"* (Bengel). Just as when there is a fire, we deal with it by pouring on water - so when trouble arises, we need to deal with it by prayer.

Or as some wit scribbled on the walls of an air-raid shelter during the 2nd World War: *"If your knees are knocking, kneel on them"*

Don't worry – instead ***tell God what is on your heart – pray to him!***

The fact is that there is nothing too great for God's power, and nothing too small for his fatherly care.

Do you believe that? Have you discovered that?

As children feel free to talk to their father about absolutely anything, so too we may feel free to bring anything. The one difference, of course, is that prayer is directed to no ordinary father, but rather to God himself, to the supreme Person of the universe, who not only can hear and understand, but who is also able to respond to our concerns and cares.

Do notice that when Paul tells the Philippians to stop worrying, it is not because he makes light of the troubles which they face, but because he knows that God is greater than all their troubles.

Furthermore, ***tell God what exactly is troubling you: "ask God for what you need"***.

Don't just say *"O God, help me"*. Be specific and state your case.

My mind goes to the story of Bartimaeus, the blind beggar. Jesus on hearing his cry for help, called him over and asked: **"What do you want me to do for you?"**.

The man's need was obvious, but Jesus made him formulate his need: **"Teacher, let me see again"** (Mark 10.51)

All too often our prayers are not explicit. We approach God vaguely, piously, ambiguously, hoping that somehow he will notice and get the point of what we are trying to say. But Paul says: **"in all your prayers ask God for what you need"**
Stop beating about the bush. Spit it out and tell him.

It maybe that you don't know what exactly to ask him.

It may be that you don't know how your anxiety might be relieved.

But at least ***tell him what's wrong.***

Be like the OT character Hezekiah, who on the receipt of a letter carrying a very disturbing piece of news – viz. that Israel was about to be wiped out - **"went to the Temple, (&) placed the letter there in the presence of the Lord"**(2 Kings 19.14).

"Lord, this is the mess in which we are in - please help!"

Whatever the invading anxiety, we can always do just that.

It is a marvellously healing thing to take God into our confidence about everything.

2. THANK GOD

"(In all your prayers ask God for what you need,) always asking him with a thankful heart".

Thanksgiving is a vital ingredient in our praying. Indeed, it is possible that here the emphasis is not on the fact that the Philippians are to tell God their troubles and to ask for his help, but rather that they are to do it with thanksgiving.

Certainly Paul was a great one for believing that every prayer should contain thanksgiving.

- He told the Thessalonians: "**Pray at all times, be thankful in all circumstances**" (1 Thess 5.17,18)
- He wrote to the Colossians: "**Be persistent in prayer, and keep alert as you pray, giving thanks to God**" (Col 4.2).
- Indeed, he put his own teaching into practice: e.g. he wrote to the Ephesians "**I have not stopped giving thanks to God for you. I remember you in my prayers**" (Eph 1.16)
- Similarly to the Philippians he wrote: "**I thank my God for you every time I think of you; and every time I pray for you all, I pray with joy**" (Phil 1.3)

Prayer and thanksgiving went hand in hand for Paul.

How do our prayers match up to Paul's idea of prayer?

When we are feeling unhappy, when life is doing its level best to thwart our plans and defeat our hopes, do we ever pause and give thanks to God?

As one Christian put it: "*Turn over the page to the credit side of the account... Why, even when life is at its worst, that credit side is loaded and packed full with mercies*".

With the Psalmist we need to "**bless the Lord & not forget all his benefits**" (Ps 103.2 NRSV)

Too often we start to pray at the wrong place.

- We begin with ourselves instead of God.
- We begin with asking instead of thanking.

Paul urges us to thank God. This does us a power of good.

- For it is as we thank God - as we recall his goodness to us in the past - that our own immediate problems in the present gain their true perspective. God, and not our problems, begins to overshadow us.
- As we thank God and remind ourselves of what he has done in the past, we remind ourselves that what he has done in the past he can do in the present and the future.

Thanking God for his goodness very often enables us to face up to our worries and anxieties.

In the words of Karl Barth, the greatest theologian of the last century: "*To begin by praising God for the fact that in **this** situation, as it is, he is so mightily God - such a beginning is the **end** of anxiety. To be anxious means that we ourselves suffer, ourselves groan, ourselves seek to see ahead. Thanksgiving means giving God the glory in everything, making room for him, casting our care on him, letting it be his care. The troubles that exercise us then cease to be hidden and bottled up. They are, so to speak, laid open to God, spread out before him*"

3. TRUST GOD

For those who trust God – or as Paul puts it here – those who are “**in union with Christ**”, and who express their trust in God by bringing their concerns to him, there is a promise.

"And God's peace, which is far beyond all human understanding, will keep your hearts and minds safe in union with Christ Jesus"

Peterson: *"Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the centre of your life"*.

Do notice that the peace in question is God's peace.

It is the peace which belongs to God and which God gives to those who trust him.

In the words of one commentator, it is *"the calm serenity that characterizes the very nature of God and that grateful, trusting Christians are welcome to share"*

(Hawthorne).

This peace is very different from the kind of peace offered by self-help manuals.

In preparing for this sermon I came across a book on **Stressmanship** which detailed a five-step procedure to gaining tranquility. Let me quote:

1. *Choose a room you like and in which you feel at peace... Close the door and make sure you are undisturbed for half an hour.*
2. *Loosen all tight clothing, take off your shoes and pick a comfortable chair in which you can lie back and feel at peace.*
3. *Use the calming breath technique ... to calm and steady you. Close your eyes, lie back and let go. Just be pleased to be at peace and quiet.*
4. *Pick a word which makes you **feel** peaceful. I use the word 'Peace'. Murmur it softly to yourself... **Feel** peaceful and utterly at rest.*
5. *Do not worry if your thoughts drift. Just keep the word peace in your mind and let it happen... At the end of half an hour, come to slowly and take a deep energising breath. You are rested, calm and tranquil"*

Such a peace is based on self-induced feelings. The peace we may experience is ***the peace which God gives***, and which is based on reality.

Furthermore, this peace God gives affects not only the way we feel, but also the way we think: **"God's peace will keep your hearts and minds safe"**

In the NT the term '**heart**' does not mean the physical organ that pumps the blood.

Rather it designates the seat of one's emotions or deepest feelings.

By contrast the **mind** is responsible for producing thoughts.

God's peace will keep our hearts and minds safe: - literally, God's peace **will keep guard over our hearts & minds.**

Paul is here using a military term picturing God's peace as a detachment of soldiers *"standing guard over"* a city to protect it from attack.

This term must have had a special force for the members of the church at Philippi. For Philippi was a Roman colony, and there was a garrison in occupation.

Many a time his readers had watched Roman soldiers mounting guard and the sentries patrolling the gates.

That, declares Paul, is what the peace of God will do for you if you have entrusted your life to him: "*God's peace, like a garrison of soldiers, will keep guard over your thoughts and feelings, so that they will be as safe against the assaults of worry and fear as any fortress*" (Hawthorne).

Think for a moment what this means.

It doesn't mean that the causes of our anxiety will be removed.

It does not mean that Christians, any more than anyone else, are promised exception from the troubles, difficulties and disappointments of life.

It certainly did not mean that for Paul - with his floggings & stonings, shipwrecks & imprisonments. It did not mean that for Jesus: he ended up on a cross.

It doesn't mean that we shall be free from troubles.

But it does mean this - that when troubles come, as they will do, then God's peace will save us from the debilitating worry.

NB Leonard Griffiths: "*God's peace protects us... not against failure but against the pessimism that failure brings, not against sorrow and bereavement but against hopelessness and despair, not against illness & disease but against the spirit of murmuring and complaining, not against the weapons that can hurt the body, but against the weapons that can destroy the peace of mind and heart*"

This peace of God, says Paul, "*rises above every mind*"

This phrase is open to more than one interpretation.

According to the GNB & most English translations, God's peace is "**beyond all human understanding**" (GNB) – it is so marvelous that no human mind can comprehend its significance. It surpasses all human reason.

Alternatively we might translate this phrase as "*the peace of God excels all human planning*" i.e. God's peace is able to produce far better results than any form of intellectual effort.

Jesus said to his disciples in the Upper Room: "**Peace is what I leave with you; it is my own peace that I give you. I do not give it as the world does. Do not be worried and upset; do not be afraid**" (Jn 14.27).

To experience this peace, we need to live our lives "**in union with Christ Jesus**".

This involves trusting Jesus, not just once, but day by day.

The great Scottish preacher JS Stewart put it this way: "*The peace of God is not something to be captured once for all; it is something requiring to be recaptured all over again every day. It is achieved not by one big spectacular resolution, but by a daily re-surrender of life to God, an ever renewed grip of the only Hand that can hold us upright and keep us safe*"

God's peace - which is beyond all understanding - which keeps guard over our thoughts and our feelings - is available to all who entrust their lives to his safekeeping.

What a wonderful gift God offers us.

In the light of the strains and stresses, the worries and the anxieties of life today, we would be fools to turn our backs on this offer.