

## **Phil 2.1-11: THE CHRISTMAS CHALLENGE TO BE CHRISTLIKE!**

*[Chelmsford 11 December 2011]*

How would you best like to be remembered?

What would you like written in your obituary in the paper?

What would you like your friends to say at the 'wake' after the funeral?

- "He was always ready to help those in need"?
- "She was a good mother"?
- "He was a faithful friend"?

The last thing we would want would be:

- "He was a constant trouble-maker"
- "She was a quarrelsome bitch"

And yet this is how two characters in the NT are best remembered:

In Phil 4.2 we read Paul saying: "**Euodia and Syntyche, please, I beg you, try to agree as sisters in the Lord**" [literally, *be of the same mind*].

Has it ever struck you that this is all that we know about Euodia and Syntyche - or as one wag called them "*Odious and Soon-touchy*"? Actually their names mean 'Success' and 'Lucky' - clearly their parents in giving them such names wanted them to do well in life.

And maybe they had done well

I used to think of them as ladies who were full of good works - making the tea, arranging the flowers, visiting the sick...

But as I prepared for this sermon, one of the commentators suggested that they could well have been leaders in the church.

But whatever role they had, they just couldn't get on with one another.

It must have been a pretty serious quarrel for Paul to mention in this public way - and incidentally, this reference would have been very public. For Paul's letters were read out to everybody at a church service.

Just imagine the reaction of the two ladies when this passage was reached.

Almost certainly their quarrel was no private affair - it seems that it had spilled over into the life of the church as a whole - maybe people were taking sides.

Clearly the fellowship was not united. Division was threatened.

This is the context in which Paul wrote to the church at Philippi:

**"I urge you, then to make me completely happy by having the same thoughts [lit.: *be of the same mind*] sharing the same love, and being one in soul and mind. Don't do anything from selfish ambition or from a cheap desire to boast, but be humble towards one another, always considering others better than yourselves. And look out for one another's interests, not just for your own. The attitude you should have is the one Christ Jesus had [lit. *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*]" (Phil 2.2-5)**

## 1. BE UNITED

**"Make me completely happy by having the same thoughts [lit. *be of the same mind*], sharing the same love, and being one in soul and mind" (Phil 2.2).**

Here is Paul's picture of an ideal church - a church which is one in Christ - truly united in purpose and in love. Let's unpack this a little:

### *i) be united in purpose*

Literally Paul says: **"be of the same mind"** (NRSV).

Indeed he says it not once, but twice. Look carefully and you will discover that he repeats himself in v2, and then returns to the same theme in v5.

What does it mean to **"be of the same mind"**?

GNB translates: **"have (having) the same thoughts"** - but I am not convinced that is the happiest of translations. Christians aren't all built in the same mould, thank God. I dread the way when we all have the same taste in music, all support the same football team, all dress alike, all think alike..

Unity does not imply uniformity.

Being "one in Christ Jesus" does not mean we do not retain our differences - as surely as variety is characteristic of God's created world, so surely is variety to be characteristic of God's new creation.

To be **"of the same mind"** is not to think alike in every area of life.

The Christian life would then be very monochrome.

It is rather to have the same purpose undergirding every area of life - to have a common attitude - as Christians we are called to be facing the same direction.

As a church we need to have a shared purpose. Already theoretically we have it.

- We have a common mission: to go Christ's way and make disciples.
- We have a common vision: We want to be a strong and vibrant town-centre church where every member is passionate for God, passionate for one another, passionate for others, passionate to grow in the faith, and passionate to serve Jesus.

If we are to be truly united, then we need to turn this slogan into reality.

### *ii) be united in love*

**"share the same love and be one in soul and mind"**

Let me remind you of the opening verses of 1 Cor 13: **"I may be able to speak the languages of human beings and even of angels, but if I have no love, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell. I may have the gift of inspired preaching; I may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains, but if I have no love, I am nothing. I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burnt – but if I have no love, this does me no good"** (1 Cor 13.1-3).

Remember that these words were written to a church.

- We may have the most fantastic of services and hear the most splendid of preachers, but without love it is all nothing.
- We may engage in the most ambitious of community projects, but without love it is nothing.

Without love, nothing we do will have any effect.

Love is the key.

And so Paul entreats: "**share the same love and be one in soul and mind**".

And what Paul says to the church at Philippi, he also says to us.

Let's be honest: there are people in our fellowship who rub us up the wrong way.

There are those whom we find unattractive & difficult.

But they are brothers and sisters for whom Christ died

I find it significant that the word for love is "**agape**" - that word which denotes Christ-like love - love which loves the unlovely and the unlovable.

Or as someone once said: "*Love begins when someone else's needs are more important than my own*". Wow – that's a thought!

## 2. BE HUMBLE & NOT SELF-CENTERED

Phil 2:3-4 "**Don't do anything from selfish ambition or from a cheap desire to boast, but be humble towards one another, always considering others better than yourselves. And look out for one another's interests, not just for your own**"

Paul's instructions for church life have a positive and a negative thrust:

### *i) Negatively: Forget No, 1*

**"Don't do anything from selfish ambition or a cheap desire to boast"** (2.3)

**"Look out for one another's interests, not just for your own"** (2.4)

Benjamin Disraeli once said: "*Talk to a man about himself and he will listen for hours*". Naturally we are self-centered - we live for self.

Indeed, in a very real sense the essence of sin is living for self - sin is spelt S-I-N!

There is no place for **selfish ambition**. Do note: ambition in itself is not wrong.

It's not wrong to be ambitious for Christ & his church.

But if our ambition centres around ourselves, then it is definitely out-of-order

There is no place for "**a cheap desire to boast**" [NRSV: *conceit*] - literally "*empty glory*". Paul almost certainly was looking ahead to the portrayal of Jesus as the one who emptied himself of glory by giving up all he had.

*ii) Positively: Think of others*

**"Be humble towards one another, always considering others better than yourselves"** (v3); **"Look out for one another's interests"** (v4)

**"Be humble"**. Did you know that humility is a uniquely Christian virtue? In the ancient world humility is not considered to be a virtue, but a short-coming. Indeed, the same often remains true today. I find that in many social settings, people are almost vying to tell everybody how clever they are, how interesting they are, and what they and their family have been up to in the last few days. Paul says: **"be humble"**,

If you are going to rival one another, then rival one another in the esteem you accord one another: **"outdo one another in showing honor"** (Rom 12.10 NRSV)

Fred Craddock in his commentary wrote: *"Paul regarded as inappropriate to the body of Christ the selfish eye, the pompous mind, the ear hungry for compliments and the mouth that spoke none, the heart that had little room for others, and the hand that served only the self"*.

As we tell our children, if we want *joy* in our lives, both as individuals and as a church, then it is **"Jesus first, Others next, Yourselves last"**

### **3. FOLLOW CHRIST'S PATTERN**

Then at this point we have an example of how in all things God works together for good: for Paul goes on to quote a truly wonderful Christian hymn. Had the Philippian church not been threatened by vision, it is questionable whether we would every have known it:

Phil 2:5-8 **"The attitude you should have is the one that Christ Jesus had:**

- **He always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to remain equal with God.**
- **Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had and took the nature of a servant.**
- **He became like a human being and appeared in human likeness.**
- **He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death – his death of on Cross**

Here we learn what it is to be **"humble"** (v3) - humility is not to be equated with modesty - it is about giving up our rights

Here we learn what it means to **"look out for one another's interests"** (v4) - it doesn't mean being interested in the well-being of others, but rather giving of ourselves in sacrificial service.

Jesus was God's Son - **"He always had the very nature of God"** (v6).

And yet he was ‘the Man for others’: “**he did not think that by force he should try to remain equal with God**”

Though the divine nature was his, he did not seek to hold on to the status which God alone enjoys as ruler of the universe.

Do note that there is a difference between nature and status: children share their parents' nature, but not their status: e.g. our 4 children are our "flesh and blood", what we are they are. But there is a distinction between us: we are their parents; they are our children.

Similarly there is a distinction within the Godhead: the Son is subordinate to the Father. Though Jesus shared in the nature of God, he did not seek to make himself equal with God

**"Instead of his own free will he gave up all he had".**

Of what did he empty himself? What did he give away? His glory - his privileges!

- In order to save us, Jesus became a human being confined within space and time.
- He gave up some of his divine attributes - he put to one side his omnipotence, his omniscience, his omnipresence.
- Jesus gave up all those things that were rightfully his

Here we come face to face with the mystery of the incarnation: fully God, yet fully man. "*God contracted to a span*" as Wesley puts it in one of his hymns.

And yet we don't have here theology for theology's sake. Rather Paul uses his theology as the basis for Christian ethics. Jesus is the pattern of our life together.

**"The attitude you should have is the one that Christ Jesus had"**

At any time of the year this is a challenge – but in the run-up to Christmas the challenge has particular force.

For this is the time of the year when we are focus on the Christ who gave up the glory that was rightfully his to become one of us.

In the light of the of the Lord who gave up all he had, **look out for one another's interests**; make sure there is no room for **selfish ambition** or for boasting.

Instead let our **attitude** – our mind – be that of Jesus.

And so we are back at where we began - an appeal to the Euodias & Syntyches of this world - to people like you and me

- to be united in one purpose and one love;
- to be humble and not self-centered
- to follow the pattern of Jesus, God's Son who became the Man for others