

### Sermon Evensong Trinity XVII Year A 2023

It is a sure truth of life that when faced with hardships, when life is difficult, when things are not easy and we confront the possibility of our own demise and death, that our priorities are put into perspective. When hardships and difficulties are before us, when we risk losing all, we see what truly matters. The second reading tonight from Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians illustrates a case in point. This little gem of a letter is just four chapters long. Easily read over a single cup of tea! It seems likely that his little letter is in fact made up of three separate letters that have been collected together to preserve them. The fragments (or the whole) written about mid 50s-early 60s of the First Century AD.

It is Paul's imprisonment that appears to have helped order the apostle's priorities. In the portion we have heard tonight, Paul is explicit that his imprisonment *is for Christ*. From elsewhere in the collection of Pauline letters Paul had been confined in an open house arrest. But in the text tonight we hear of a praetorium guard. A far more serious affair. An impending sense of death permeates the whole letter. And there is nothing like impending death - indeed death by execution - that helps clarify one's thinking.

With the prospect of everything else falling away, the one thing that remains for Paul - the one thing that now matters for him - is this: *that Christ is proclaimed in every way*. For sure, some of the old disappointments and frustrations remain. But Paul is able to put them into a more generous kind of perspective. Some of the harder edges that appear elsewhere in his writings have softened. *Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, he writes, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love... the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment.* Paul describing here a far-from-ideal situation! But an honest one. It is honest because our motives in proclaiming the gospel are not always entirely pure. But he goes on. *What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed...whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.*

It is an important perspective, and one we would do well to remember: that God can redeem our bad and less-than-perfect motives and change them to his good ends. And if truth be told, most of our motives, even in the service of God, *are* mixed. If we just waited for entirely pure motives to inspire us and further us to action, then perhaps next to nothing would be done in service of the gospel.

But God takes what we offer – even the very small and imperfect – and transforms them to his good ends. Perhaps even some of us here tonight are here with less than pure motives! We might be tired, grumpy, or distracted. Perhaps we are thinking about dinner, or what is happening in the week ahead. We cannot concentrate on the readings and prayers. We are only here for some decent music, or because you slept in this morning and missed mass. Yet tonight, God will take our imperfect and little offerings and transform them. And *despite* ourselves – certainly not because of ourselves! – true and worthy worship will still be offered in this place.

The recognition that God will use us how God sees fit, whatever our situation and whatever our limitations, is where Paul comes to in regard to his own life. As mentioned, Paul senses the inevitable: that his period of imprisonment will have only one natural conclusion. But rather than being a source of distress, it is something he longs for, because he knows it will bring him to the fullness of life in Christ. But even as Paul looks to his ultimate hope and goal, he recognizes his work on earth might not yet be done. *Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.* And so, he must allow his own hope for himself to give way to what God's hope might be for him. *I am hard pressed between the two, he admits. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.*

Paul faces his fate with what is really an enviable lightness. But in this he provides us with a helpful pattern. Ours is an age of searing contradictions. On the one hand there is a vain clinging to life, a striving for perpetual health and youthfulness, as though they were ends in themselves. On the other hand, there is an avoidance of suffering, and a dismissal of suffering as a moral evil. A clinging to life and a running away from it. But Paul is liberated from these contradictions, because *his life* is not the focus. His focus is Christ. His life – and indeed his death – has meaning through Christ. And he sees that both through his life or his death he will serve Christ.

True freedom and true abundance of life does not come by pursuing a goal of self fulfilment. True freedom and abundance of life come by giving oneself over to the mystery of Christ. Oh! That we would all approach our lives - and our deaths - from such a place. Amen.