

Sharing in Christ (Philippians 1. 1-11)

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Paul's letter to the Philippians is one of the more approachable and likeable bits of his apostolic correspondence. In Philippians, there are no troublesome household codes with their exhortations to women and slaves to remain in their place; there is no major conflict between Paul and the community itself. It is, as scholar Bonnie Thurston has put it, a letter of encouragement to dear friends in the key of joy. It also reflects, she says, 'Paul's most mature theology'.¹ And since this theology has profoundly shaped all subsequent Christian understanding of the meaning of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, I wanted to take the opportunity given us by the lectionary over the next four weeks, to spend some time with this letter.

Let's begin with a bit of context. Sometime around AD 50, the apostle Paul crossed from Asia Minor to Macedonia, to the north of modern day Greece. The city of Philippi seems to have been the first place he visited – and the first European community of converts he established. Philippi was a Roman colony and its inhabitants were Roman citizens – including both a Greek speaking indigenous population, and Latin speaking expats from Italy who had settled there after the civil wars following the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE.² In Paul's day, it would have been a city of around 10, 000 people – mostly pagan, with no real evidence of a Jewish community there. So Paul came and preached the gospel, and at some point after he had left the city, apparently while he was imprisoned somewhere and

¹ Bonnie B. Thurston and Judith M. Ryan, *Philippians & Philemon*, Sacra Pagina Series Vol.10, ed. Daniel J. Harrington SJ (Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 2005), p.4.

² Charles A. Wannamaker, 'Philippians' in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, eds. James D.G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), p.1394.

sometime between 50 and 60 CE, Paul wrote back ‘to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi’.

An early and striking theme in this letter is the theme of sharing or fellowship (*koinonia*). Paul says he thanks God for the Philippians because of their ‘sharing in the gospel from the first day until now’ (1.5), and he tells them ‘all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel’ (1.7). This word ‘*koinonia*’ is a particularly strong and evocative word in early Christianity, and means more than simple association. Thurston says that those in fellowship with one another were responsible for each other, and this included financial responsibility – which the Philippians have showed toward Paul.³ Later on, Paul speaks of his hope that he will ‘share abundantly’ in the community’s boasting in or glorifying of Jesus when he visits them again.

This theme of sharing or fellowship, in the sense of participation, also seems to be central to the way Paul understood his relationship with Christ. He speaks in our passage of ‘longing for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus’ (1. 8) – as if he shares in Christ’s own compassion or as if both he and the Philippians dwell within Christ’s compassion.⁴ Later, he speaks of Christ being ‘exalted now as always in my body’. The Greek word here is ‘magnified’, made large, and the idea is that it is Christ himself who is ‘increased’ or magnified by Paul’s faithfulness.⁵ He speaks of the privilege both he and the Philippians have of suffering for Christ, and in other letters, he speaks of believers sharing in Christ’s sufferings so that they may share in his glory (2 Cor. 1.5; Rom 8.17).

What seems striking about all this is the way Paul suggests an experience of fellowship with Christ and with the Christian community that is a real sharing of life – not just robust community spirit, not just dedicated worship, but something like identification – the possibility of being one with other people and one with Christ in

³ Thurston, *Philippians & Philemon*, p.49.

⁴ Thurston, *Philippians & Philemon*, p.51.

⁵ Thurston, *Philippians & Philemon*, p.63.

such a way as really to share one another's sufferings and one another's joys, as really to be part of one body which is the body of Christ, and to participate in the sufferings of Christ for the salvation of the world. This language is, at one level, so familiar to us that we take it for granted. But what does it really mean?

I think it is those we call 'mystics' who point the way. They are those whose experience touches the reality that Paul is seeking to convey and out of which he believes we are all called to live. By 'mystical', I don't mean particular kinds of supernatural phenomena – being caught up in the seventh heaven and so on. I mean the transformation of our consciousness, of our whole selves – such that we come to know and love God and other people with the very knowledge and love of God. This knowledge and love is always one-making – always about breaking down illusions of separateness, always about profound mutuality and belonging. In the contemplative tradition it is called the 'unitive way'.

Often we read Paul moralistically – and he *is* offering encouragement to live a certain way. But it matters what we understand the source of that way of living to be. Thomas Merton wrote [with apologies for the gendered language]:

“Religion”, in the sense of something emanating from man's nature and tending to God, does not really change man or save him, but brings him into a false relationship with God: for a religion that starts in man is nothing but man's wish for himself. Man “wishes himself” ... to become godly, holy, gentle, pure, etc. His wish terminates not in God but in himself. This is no more than the religion of those who wish themselves to be in a certain state in which they can live with themselves, approve of themselves: ... How many Christians seriously believe that Christianity itself consists of nothing more than this? Yet it is anathema to true Christianity'.⁶

Paul gives thanks that the Philippians share in the gospel, but this means sharing, not in a religious ideology or moral virtue about which they can all feel good,

⁶ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1995), p.154.

but in the process of being transformed by God working in them – through the paradoxical gifts of such things as imprisonment, humiliation and the like. ‘I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ’ (1.6), Paul writes. As God works in us, we experience an ever deepening sharing in the compassion of Christ, a growth in love, knowledge and insight. Our lives must reflect this participation and growth. As Merton says, ‘One cannot be justified by a faith that does not do the works of love, for love is the witness and evidence of “new being” in Christ’. But, he goes on, ‘precisely this love is primarily the work of Christ in me, not simply something that originates in my own will and is then approved and rewarded by God ... No work of mine can be called “love” in the Christian sense, unless it comes from Christ’.⁷ The problem with those who think themselves ‘good’, those who are concerned to reap their own ‘harvest of righteousness’ rather than the ‘harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God’ [as Paul puts it], is that they are ‘tempted to believe in their own goodness and their own capacity to love’. In this of course, they are self-deceived, and liable to do terrible things in the name of ‘the good’.⁸ But Paul is inviting us to a deeper kind of goodness, and a fellowship that goes beyond what we can generate by our own efforts.

How do we offer ourselves to be transformed in this way? How do we grow in *koinonia* – sharing in the gospel and in the compassion, love and knowledge of Christ? We’ll hear more of it next week, as we turn to chapter 2 of the letter and the exhortation to imitate Christ’s humility. But, you know already – our practice of meditation puts us on the way. It helps us to begin to let go our pretensions to a goodness of our own, and teaches us to wait on the gift of God’s grace, drawing us into true sharedness of life with and through Jesus Christ.

⁷ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p.170.

⁸ Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p.170.