

Philippians 4:2-9 @ Ctk, title 'Celebration' - REJOICE

March this year saw death of Ronnie Corbett. Anyone a fan of 2 Ronnies? Dad loved them, so I sort of grew up with them, we never missed their show. Favourite part was Ronnie's long jokes – small fella, big chair – would tell one joke but endless tangents and digressions, took about 10 minutes. Eventually get to punchline – seemed almost funnier because made you wait so long.

Here in letter of Philippians, we finally get to punchlines of Paul's letter. Where Paul been heading but went off on a tangent (brilliant tangent by way, bible would have a huge hole if Phil 3 not in it). Big challenges for Phil church: opposition from outside and disunity within it. Paul's message simple one: **stand firm and stand together**. Church had lots going for it (not a mess like Corinthians or Galatians) but a bit fragile. Paul's pep talk addressed key themes – stand firm, and do that together: stand firm together.

So what are punchlines he gets to here in ch4? We'll get there in a minute, but I think there's also another thread running under the surface of this last part of the text. One of the great elements of Paul's letters is that there's a remarkable consistency of thought. You see similar threads expressed in different ways across many letters. One of his earliest letters was Galatians, and you may remember that the life of the Spirit is a key theme of that letter. And how does he summarise what that life looks like? The Fruit of Spirit (he says Gal 5) is love, joy, peace (EXPAND). And you'll see first 3 of love, joy and peace recurring as key themes in many other letters. And these 3 set the tone for this passage in Phil 4 as well, in that order. So we'll look at each in turn:

Love – in this case the outworking of love is unity. As mentioned, this was a major concern of letter, frequent references to being united in Spirit. But never cuts to chase, always in general terms. Almost finished letter in 3:1 ('Finally...') and then opened another theme. Perhaps after this digression, Paul realised that skirting round issue (know how you have certain friends who have something to say and never get to point, finally tell you just as they leave) – maybe like that here (quite unlike Paul, usually very direct, so must be a tricky one). He's skirted round issue of unity and finally gets to point, he names source of it in v2-3a: READ.

Disunity kills a church. But let's be clear what it is: not about all agreeing on everything. Normal to have differences: what Paul means is what he says in 2:2 'one in spirit and purpose'. Here he uses shorthand: 'in the Lord'. Stay united on the key things. And if necessary, get someone else to mediate – we don't know who the 'true companion' or 'yokefellow' was, but every church needs a Syzygus or two. Honour them, by the way, because they're often not the most high profile. Stand together, Paul says, for the cause of the gospel.

Peace – famous bit of passage, bit that everyone quotes: peace which comes from fruit of prayer (v6-7 – READ v7) and imitating right example (v9 – READ v9b). Come back to detail of these verses in a moment, but here just want to make an observation about the word 'peace'. Often misunderstood: here's how Alec Motyer describes it: Q p168. Peace not a marshmallow word, but a strong one. Why? Look at uses. Associated with salvation (risen Christ Jn 20 'peace be with you'), with power e.g. Hebrews 13:20 READ, and victory Romans 16:20 READ.

Good e.g. this week: Andy Murray's win at Wimbledon (who watched?). Striking interview afterward – never really enjoyed first win, too much pressure. This time much more at peace – peace achieved through conquest and victory.

Joy – often overlooked – picks up other major theme of letter – stand firm. But takes it on a bit, addresses the 'How' element to that. One key is joy: could summarise as 'joy in midst of trial'.

Paul findings reasons to be joyful throughout letter (despite being prison):

- 1:4-5 – partners in gospel and God finishes what he starts
- 1:18-19 – Christ is being preached and God will deliver him, one way or another
- Underlying message: If I can rejoice in prison, you should too! Starts to wrap up letter in 3:1 and gets distracted onto another major piece of teaching – finally gets back there again in 4:4

Rejoice – are you listening, church? – rejoice! (Repetition like God to Joshua – have I not told you, be strong and courageous!)

What mean to rejoice? Misunderstood. I almost preached wrong sermon today. Equate with praise – temporary state of exultation. Of course that's important. Not thrust of passage here.

Permanent state of joyfulness, of rejoicing – about our minds, our hearts and our lives – that's what he deals with here. Reverse order in terms of passage:

Minds v8-9 – joy through what we focus on. Glass half full or half empty? Here's a message especially to 'half-empty' people: GIGO (EXPAND). Not garbage, but good! We cultivate a state of joy by what we choose to focus on. Things that inspire us will cause us to rejoice.

What inspires you? (Why testimony slot today) we are what we worship (worship = honour) – honour right stuff and God's joy will be more present in your life.

Hearts v6-7 – joy through what we pray for. Lack of peace causes lack of joy – so joyful life needs prayer at its heart. Note importance of thanksgiving even in offering our needs to God. What God gives us passes understanding.

Phrase has 2 meanings – so much better than we could imagine for ourselves; OR supernaturally given. Both true. Fruit of Spirit are cultivated but also given supernaturally – we can ask for and receive peace of Christ. Likewise his joy. We rejoice 'in the Lord'. Thankful prayer is a key to joy because God can work his presence miraculously in our hearts.

Lives v5 – joy manifested through gentleness evident to all – in other words, a joyful contentment to live like Jesus (another theme of letter e.g. Phil 2) – that's connection. Often wondered how v4 and v5 connect – to rejoice in the Lord is to be content to live like Jesus lived.

As an aside, also speaks into continuing pastoral challenge of Euodia and Syntyche in conflict. Vision, passion, strong leadership needs sweetening with gentleness. Need to do right things in right way.

God's word for us today: rejoice! But more than praise, it's a state of being, a state of our minds, hearts and lives. What is God saying to you today:

- Maybe challenge is to focus more on things to inspire you and cause you to praise
- Maybe it's to pray with thanksgiving and ask for and receive peace of Christ
- Maybe it's to rejoice Mon to Sat through a gentle life which exudes joy of Christ in challenging circumstances.

Either way, the message is clear: rejoice. I will say it again: Rejoice. Amen.