

Sunday 20th September – Philippians 4:4-9 ‘Homemade PEACE’

If I asked you to imagine the most peaceful place you could think of, I wonder what would come to mind? Perhaps lying on a beach listening to the waves gently lapping the shore. Perhaps sitting on the top of a hill or a mountain, viewing the quiet world stretched out like a canvas. Perhaps sat in your favourite chair in the garden watching a robin on your bird feeder. Perhaps listening to your favourite song on the sofa with a steaming cup of hot chocolate in your hand.

I doubt many of you were thinking of sitting on a stone floor in prison, chained to the wall, with the smell of blood and urine in your nostrils. That is where St Paul wrote these famous verses – no hot chocolate on the sofa or waves lapping on the shore for him. Just the shouts of jailers and the cries of other prisoners. Day after day, night after night.

How does someone in *that* situation get to write stuff like *this*? It's no wonder that Paul calls it the peace that transcends understanding – but it is the million dollar question. And it's a very timely one, as our news bulletins are full again this weekend with warnings of another lockdown and COVID infections on the rise again. Peace is more than the absence of threat – **true peace is able to exist in times of threat**. As we observed last week, if things like joy or peace are to mean anything at all, they have to be possible in times like this, or they're not much use at all.

So how does Paul find peace sitting on a draughty floor in jail? Let's spend a few moments this morning soaking up Paul's advice – if you've got a bible to hand I recommend you pause the service and find the passage: it repays careful study, this one.

First let's notice that **Paul starts with joy before he talks about peace**. That's partly why we started with joy last week too. 'Rejoice in the Lord, always.' And in case we didn't quite listen first time, he repeats it: 'I will say it again, rejoice!' Paul is insistent that our path to peace starts with joy. As we saw last week, joy is not the same as happiness, it is a discipline and a gift, choosing to remember God's promises and his work in our lives. It is ultimately about thankfulness, which is why Paul then goes on to encourage thanksgiving in prayer. Never forget to be thankful is his first piece of advice on the path to peace. Remembering what God has *already* done makes it more likely that we can trust what he's doing now or going to do soon.

Second he takes what seems to be a diversion and talks about **living gently**. That sounds like a tangent, doesn't it – oh look at that, a blackbird! – but actually it follows more naturally than we think. Gentleness is strength under control, the capacity to harness your emotions to engage easily with people around you. That kind of emotional discipline is the groundwork we need in our lives if we're ever going to take charge of our anxiety. Gentleness is one of the most under-rated virtues, and it sits with joy as the foundation of peace.

Then Paul gets to the nitty gritty – and let's notice that he issues this less as advice than as a command, just like Jesus did to his disciples: 'Do not be anxious'. I don't think he's being harsh here, I think it's because Paul knows how damaging anxiety is to our wellbeing. It's like drinking bleach – no parent would say to their child, 'try not drink bleach, darling.' It's much more direct because we love them and we know how dangerous it is: 'Don't do it. It'll destroy you.'

I think we're too kind on anxiety – we see it as just 'one of those things'. But anxiety is corrosive to everything that the good news of our faith is meant to produce in us – it's an acid that burns away not just peace, but joy, hope and any sense of wellbeing. It doesn't actually make anything better, or change anything, it just wastes our emotional and spiritual energies to no real purpose.

Instead, Paul counsels us to **invest in the one activity we can do that *does* change things: prayer.** Pray about everything that makes you anxious, he says. As the old saying goes: when you work, you work; but when you pray, God works.

It's not a magic wand, but it is what releases the power of God into our lives. It's no surprise that Paul only talks about the peace of God that transcends understanding after we've covered everything in prayer. God comes in when he's invited. There is a mystery to it – that's why it transcends understanding – but it is a gift which guards, not just our minds but also our hearts.

Finally, the last piece of advice is to **focus on things which lift our spirits.** As we reflected last week, this isn't about pretending the bad stuff isn't there – but it is about emphasising things which cause us to feel hope, to recognise that God is real, and that the things of God's kingdom are advancing in the world. As we do that, Paul says, 'the God of peace will be with us.'

So joy and thankfulness, gentleness, prayer and positivity – these are our weapons, if I can put it like that, in the quest for peace. Anxiety is your enemy, but thanks be to God, we never fight this enemy alone. May the peace of God that transcends understanding guard *our* hearts and minds this day. Amen.