God at Work
Philippians 1:1-11

So we are starting our new series in Paul's letter to the Philippians. And if you didn't know, Philippians contains some of the best-known verses in the Bible:

'For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.' (Phil 1:21). 'Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus' (2:5). 'Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!' (4:4). 'I can do all things through him who strengthens me.' (4:13).

But to understand them, you've got to know their context, haven't you? Because this isn't some kind of cold, anonymous theological essay; it's a letter, written by a real person, the apostle Paul, to real people.

And the people Paul is writing to are Christians living in the city of Philippi, around the middle of the first century, in what is now Greece. And in Acts, Luke describes Philippi as 'a leading city of that district' (Acts 16:12). It was 10miles in land from an important port, and because the Egnation Way, that linked Rome to the East, passed through the city centre, Philippi stood at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, between Rome, the nerve centre of the empire, and her eastern territories.

But Philippi was interesting for other reasons: Its population was almost entirely made up of the descendants of Roman soldiers who settled there after a famous battle, and they took the worship of the emperor and the other Roman gods seriously.

Which begs the question, 'What's a Christian church doing there?' which is where the apostle Paul comes in. And on his second missionary journey, travelling through Turkey, it seemed as if the Lord shut one door after another, blocking their path to go here or there, until Paul had a vision of a man from Macedonia, the region of Philippi, calling for help. So Paul and his team decided that's where God wanted them and crossed over into Europe and arrived at Philippi.

And when they got there things were interesting! Because Paul's usual practice was to go to a town's synagogue, start preaching Jesus as Messiah, win some converts and plant a church. But in Philippi there weren't even enough Jewish men to have a synagogue, so he found a place just outside the city walls where some women gathered to pray, explained the gospel to them and the church began.

Now, if you went to visit Philippi today, you'd probably have a lovely holiday eating olives and soaking up the Greek sunshine. But things didn't turn out quite like that for Paul: he was arrested, flogged, put in the stocks and banged up in jail. As a result of which the jailor also got converted.

Now on his release Paul moved on to plant further churches, but for the Christians he left behind in Philippi, that opposition Paul experienced continued. And probably because of their refusal to worship the emperor, which would have closed a whole load of social and business opportunities to them, these Christians suffered serious financial hardship for their decision to follow Jesus.

In fact, when Paul is telling the church at Corinth about the Philippians he talks of their 'extreme poverty.' (2 Cor 8:2).

But that wasn't the only challenge they faced. This church was a mixed bag socially. The converts there we know of are Lydia, who was a wealthy merchant trader, a prison guard and his family, and a slave girl. And all this is in a society where social class mattered. And that would have been a serious test on their unity.

But by the time of writing this letter, Paul is once more in prison, this time in Rome, awaiting trial as a Christian. And he knows that the outcome for him is anything but certain, and so when he writes to them, he does so under the shadow of execution.

And the Philippians have heard that Paul's in trouble again. Now, they could have concentrated on their own troubles and needs, because they had enough to be going on with. And yet, they don't. Instead, they organize a collection, and send him a gift of money through the hands of a man called Epaphroditus.

But as he arrived with this gift, Epaphroditus obviously updated Paul on the health of the church back in Philippi. And whilst things were generally ok, they were struggling with some personal conflicts and with unity, and it seems like it was beginning to affect their witness to the watching world. Added to that they were facing growing hostility from outside.

And so Paul writes this letter to a people, to a church, that is obviously very dear to him. And because of the circumstances Paul's writing from: in jail, with the sword hanging over him; and because of the circumstances of the lives of these Philippians – it really is an inspirational letter. Because here are people struggling with stuff that would crush many and yet we see joy and love and generosity abounding.

So let's look at the first 11 verses.

Phil 1:1-11

Three points; Identity in Christ; Joy in Adversity; and Growth in Love.

Identity in Christ

Now in those days, there was a fairly standard way of starting a letter: you'd write who it was from, then who it was to, followed by the word, 'Greetings!' So what you'd expect to see here is Paul, to the Philippians, Greetings! But instead of just going through the motions, Paul takes that standard formula, and packs it with meaning, setting the stage for what's to come.

V1: 'Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi.' Now if you come from a more traditional church background, you might think, 'whoa! Hang on there. Shouldn't he have written: from *Saint* Paul to all the *Christians* at Philippi. Not 'Paul, servant, to the saints.' I mean, I thought he was

the saint, I thought he was the one they make stained glass windows of. I thought you had to be especially holy, do some miracle, become a pope or something to become a saint. So why's he calling these everyday, struggling, poverty stricken Christians 'saints'?

And that reaction, at least in part, is right isn't? Because the word 'saint' does come from the word *holy*. And if these Philippians were just normal people like you and me, they probably weren't spiritual giants or extra-especially holy. Because any of us with even a drop of self-insight know what we're like on the inside. We know that if a church building committee was drawing up a list of candidates for the next stained glass window, Martin Slack wouldn't make the cut. But Paul says it's not about us. Look how Paul describes them: they are 'saints *in Christ Jesus'*. This is about their and our identity in Christ. And those who trust in Jesus and not in themselves, and say I want to be counted on his side, God sees as united with Him, as holy and set apart, because He is holy.

Now often we try and find acceptance in God's sight by trying to get our lives sorted, trying to make the grade, trying to be a saint; or we try and find acceptance in the eyes of others by appearing at our best, or appear better than we are. But the gospel is about God accepting you now, as you really are, with all your faults and failings, because of Jesus.

And knowing that he accepts you, knowing that God your Father approves of you and counts you as His because of Jesus has two effects.

Firstly it affects how you see yourself. Look how Paul describes himself and Timothy. V1 again: 'Paul and Timothy, *servants* of Christ Jesus'. So in the place where you'd expect Paul to say, 'Paul, *apostle* of God' – a man sent from God – he says servant. Literally bondservant, slave. You see when you know that you are loved and accepted by God, that you're a saint, you'll also happily be a servant, a servant of the best master you could ever have. And in being his servant you know that you are truly free for the first time. Free from all these other things that seek to enslave you, like the need to find acceptance by others, or promote yourself, or push yourself forward.

When you know that he accepts you, there is no need to big it up, no need to pull rank, no need to try and impress, instead you are happy, and thankful to serve Jesus and His purposes, because you know you're not the king, he is.

But the second thing it affects is how you see and treat others. Because whilst Paul humbles himself: 'I'm Jesus' bondservant', he also honours those he's writing to: 'to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, with the overseers [the elders] and deacons.' He drops his title, but uses theirs. And he can do that because he doesn't need to grandstand.

You see, when we are insecure about ourselves, we can try and make ourselves look good by making others look bad. We trample on them, and their reputations, hoping we can gain a few inches in stature. But when you know that God loves you, that Christ died for you, that the only opinion that really matters

is for you, then you don't need to score cheap points off others. Instead you can humble yourself and honour them.

And look how that works out in a church that's got these cracks of division just beginning to show: He addresses the letter to 'ALL the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi' (v1). He can say that 'always in every prayer of mine for you ALL' I make my prayer with joy (v4). He's not taking sides with this faction over that faction. Paul is grateful for each and every one of them. And factions in a church can be deadly can't they? So even when a church is united, you've got to stay on your guard. And the way you can do that is to know the grace of God in your own life, and extend that same grace to others who are equally underserving. It's why instead of just writing 'greetings!' Paul writes, v2, 'grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.'.

But the gospel doesn't just affect the way we see ourselves and others, it also affects how we see the trials of life.

Joy in adversity

Now because of the number of times that Paul talks about joy in this letter, it's been called 'the epistle, the letter, of joy'. Which is bizarre isn't it, because Paul and the Philippians are facing multiple reasons to feel anything but joy.

And yet here is Paul, banged up in Rome, with the threat of execution hanging over him and he can say, v3-4, 'I *thank* my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with *joy*.' So, even in prison, at risk of losing everything, he is filled with gratitude and joy. And the question is, what lies behind that? Because that is very different from you and me isn't it? Trouble comes our way and often we find our hearts filled with anxiety, not joy. So what's behind this joy in the midst of adversity?

Well, he tells us in verse 4-5, 'always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, *because* of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.' He's just received this financial gift from the Philippians, and he hears about their concern for him, and that fills him with joy. Now you might hear that and think, 'so is he happy just because they've made his circumstances a bit easier?' But it goes much deeper than that doesn't it. For Paul, his joy wasn't dependent on everything in life going right or being comfortable. He can rejoice in the midst of adversity, because he knows these guys, with all their troubles, are partners standing with him in the gospel, and his joy came from seeing the gospel doing its work in their lives. That just as Christ gave himself sacrificially for them, they're giving sacrificially to Paul. That just as Christ suffered for them, they are willing to suffer for Christ. And Paul sees that partnership in the gospel and he knows that God is at work.

Which leads to the second reason that Paul can find joy in adversity, and that's because he knows that whatever life throws at us, God will finish his work in our lives. V6: 'And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.'

Now, many of us, we're great starters, aren't we? We have some great idea, like a DIY project, or some new resolution, and it starts so well. But we're not quite so good at finishing. Well, Paul, and the Philippians, and you and I, can face what we face in life, the bad as well as the good, and face it with joy, because God is committed to us from beginning to end. And when you know that God is *not* like us, that He doesn't leave a job half done, then you know that the tough times of life are not because God has cast you off or abandoned you or decided He can't be bothered to finish the job. Rather like a master sculptor working on the marble, God your heavenly Father is putting His finishing touches to your life and using the circumstances, even the hammer blows of life, to fit you for heaven.

And Paul sees those evidences of grace already at work in their lives; he knows that God has started something, so he knows God will see it through. And he's sure of it precisely because it doesn't depend on Paul, or the Philippians, or you and me. I mean, if you and me getting to the last day better than we started, or even just crossing the finish line, depended on us, we'd be in trouble wouldn't we? We'd be at the whim of our constant tendency to wander off, or our inability to finish a job. And we might be tempted to despair at our circumstances or failings. But that despair comes from looking to ourselves, to our inability to change ourselves or our situation or work that situation out for good. But Paul's not looking to himself. And he can rejoice in adversity, because he knows that even in adversity God is at work, and He never leaves a job half done.

And it's that certainty that gives power to Paul's praying.

Growth in love

Now, someone has said that if you want to know what really matters to someone, see where they put their money – what do they do with their spare cash. But you can also tell a lot from our praying, can't you? The content of our prayers, what we are asking God for, says something about what matters to us. So it's fascinating to see what an apostle prays for. And interestingly, when Paul gets on his knees and prays for these Philippians, he doesn't pray for the practical difficulties they face.

V9: 'And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment.' It's interesting isn't it? Paul's not praying that they would be people of influence, or that they would grow in spiritual power, he's not even praying that they would have more gifts of the Spirit at work in their lives. What Paul's interested in is their hearts. He's praying that their *love* would grow, super-abound and overflow.

And he doesn't even qualify it with 'love *for God'* or '*for each other'*. Because love isn't a sort of add-on extra to the Christian life. It's to characterize the whole of our lives as Christians, it's to colour all our relationships, it's to motivate all our actions and decisions.

Now, when we think of love we think of the warm fuzzies, and weak knees; we think of emotion and affection. And yet Paul talks of our love growing in knowledge and all discernment. And you might think, 'well, when I hear the word

knowledge I don't think of love; I think of libraries, and geeky mathematicians, and pub quizzes.' And yet true love is dependent on knowledge, isn't it? True love can't be mindless. You can only love someone if you know them. And its as our knowledge of God increases, as we realize more and more all that He is and all that He has done for us in Jesus, that our love for Him grows, and in turn that melts our hearts in love for others.

And yet, knowledge alone isn't enough is it? I mean you can know lots about God, you can have a head full of knowledge about His ways and His word, and not be very loving in how you handle it. Or you can want to show love for someone, but the way you do it does more harm than good. And so Paul is also praying for their discernment, for their moral perception, for their tact, that these Philippians would know *practically* how to live out this life of love in relationship with others. That they'd know when to speak, and when to shut up; when to act, and when to wait.

And he's praying all this about love with two objectives in mind, and they're both in v10. And the first one is, 'So that you may approve what is excellent.' Now, to distinguish between the true and the false and the good and the bad, that's easy isn't it? But in a church, especially one where some divisions are beginning to show, to be able to see the things that really matter, to know the excellent from the good, the things of importance from lesser more trivial matters, that's what Paul's praying for: that their love would be growing and helping them to navigate those issues of life together.

And his second objective flows from that: v10 again, 'and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.' Paul's looking down the road to the last day, to the day when God finishes his work. And he's praying all this because he wants them to be pure and blameless on that day. He wants both their inner and their outer lives to be holy. Because you can be pure, and have a kind of inner holiness, but not be blameless to those looking on. And you can be blameless on the outside, as Paul once was, with a kind of religious respectability, but your inner life be way off beam. And so Paul's praying that when that last day comes, both their inner and outer lives would be pleasing to God.

Which all sounds great, of course, but how can you get there? How can love grow like that, how can your inner and your outer life match up like that? Well, the clue is in verse 11. Paul's praying that they would be 'filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.'

Let me finish with a little illustration. If you and I went for a walk around the Sistine Chapel, and you started marveling at the art-work, and saying how wonderful it was, and I stood there and started saying, 'o shucks, really it was nothing, thanks for your compliments, but I stay humble about it.' You'd think I was nuts, because that has got nothing to do with me, that's Michaelangelo's work. So why is all this growth in love and purity and blamelessness to the glory and praise of God? Because he's the artist, he's the master craftsman. And the fruit of righteousness, is the fruit that Jesus bears in your life by his Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience and all the rest. And it comes and can only come as we allow

him to do his work in our lives.

As we get our identity from Him and what He has done for us, as we look with faith to Him in all the circumstances of life, and as we allow both the hammer blows and the brush strokes to shape us into what He is creating, His grace will transform us and it will be to His eternal praise and glory.