

Philippians 4: 4-20: 'Be content; Be trusting.'

Giving & Receiving – Stewardship Sermon Sunday 2nd February 2020, St Matts Bristol

Each one of us, as I'm sure I've mentioned before, are 'Works in Progress' in our Christian journey for all of our life. I'm very much a work in progress! As I have studied the bible, prayed and thought about things, I believe God is calling me in a very clear way at this moment in time – in my personal and ministry life, to deepen my faith and trust in him, to rely more and surrender more to His love and grace. As I travelled through the 'Follow the Star readings after Christmas, this was particularly highlighted for me. Anxiety about the future, fear, reliance too much on our own strength can be things that affect a vicar as much as anyone else. As I look forward to all the good things God has in store for this church and the communities we serve, God is reminding me in a freshly clear and particular way, of the one source of light that can combat the things that may hold me back.

Jesus says, *'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'* (John 8.12).

So with that in mind, let's look at our passage for this morning.

It's been said that there are two basic problems with money. One is having it. The other is not having it. Both can cause anxiety and neither makes it *easy* to give.

Today we have a giving review. We share our financial needs as a church – set out in the booklet and letter you will be given, we encourage planned giving to God's work both here and elsewhere, and above all we turn to the Bible to let God speak to this area of our lives. The letter to the Philippians was written by the apostle Paul. 10 years earlier, he'd taken the gospel to Philippi; people came to faith, and a church was born. Paul then moved on, but the Philippians became his missionary supporters.

Now, Paul is in prison for his faith and the Philippians have just managed to get some financial help through to him. This comes out in the verses we're going to look at: 4.10-20. They say three things to this area of money and giving.

First, BE CONTENT IN CHRIST (vv10-13)

Vs.10-13 teach us that we are to find our contentment not in our circumstances or standard of living, but in Jesus.

Paul writes (v10): *I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it* (presumably because it wasn't easy to get gifts to Paul who was a long way away and in prison).

But then he realizes that could be misunderstood. So he says (v11): *Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and being in need.'*

You see what he's saying? 'It's *not* that my contentment is tied to my circumstances or standard of living. It's *not* that I *was* miserable until your gifts arrived, but now I've cheered up again.' Paul says, 'I am *not* saying this because I am in need.' Remarkable! He's in prison, he's facing possible death for his faith, yet he's content.

In the dictionary the word content says, 'satisfied, accepting one's situation; desiring nothing more or nothing different.' I wonder if we could say that about ourselves?

That's certainly not what the world encourages in us. Look at the supermarkets. They spend time creating new needs we didn't have before! There's a whole industry playing on the fact that so long as our contentment is tied to our circumstances and standard of living, we'll always want more. Therefore we'll always want more money as well. John Paul Getty was once the richest man in the world. He was asked how much money it would take for him to be completely satisfied, and he said, 'Always a little bit more.'

Contrast that with the Paul, in prison, few clothes, basic food, a Bible and some writing materials. No freedom to come and go, no comforts, no TV, house or holidays. And he says, v 11& 12: *I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty... I have learned to be content with whatever I have...*

So contentment is something *learned* over time – especially when sometimes God causes us to be in need – times that teach us not to tie our contentment to the plenty we once had (and may have again) but *to him*. And here's the key, v13:

I can do all this through him who strengthens me.'

This doesn't mean that I can suddenly become a brilliant car mechanic because, 'I can do all this through him who strengthens me.!' Paul is saying, '*I can do all this*' can **only** mean, '*I can live in every circumstance and standard of living the Lord asks me to.*' Whether at the moment the Lord has me in plenty or in want, the **secret** is in him who gives me strength', i.e. the Lord Jesus.

So whatever our circumstances – want or plenty – we look for our contentment in what we have, in Jesus. Be content in Christ.

Secondly, BE A PARTNER IN THE GOSPEL (vv14-18)

Vs. 14-18 teach us that if we're Christians, we are *partners* in the 'business' of getting the gospel to others – and that includes *financial* partnership.

Paul's just said that his contentment isn't tied to circumstances – not even to the arrival of the Philippians gift. He realizes that's open to the misunderstanding that he wasn't grateful.

Not true, v14:

'It was kind of you to share (literally, to partner in]) my distress. You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, not church shared / partnered with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once.'

In chapter 1 Paul says:

*I constantly pray with joy because of **your sharing (partnering) in the gospel**'.*

We get a snap-shot of that partnership here in v.14-16. Paul was a missionary. Sometimes he supported himself financially through tent-making. Sometimes, as with the Philippians, he received financial support from churches - to free him up to invest all his time in the work of the gospel. And that's what happened when, v15, he set off from Macedonia (where Philippi was) to take the gospel

elsewhere.

The point is: there are *two types of work*. There's 'work work' (if I can call it that) – paid and unpaid, everything from working in an office to caring for friends and family. And there's 'Gospel-work': sharing the gospel with those who're not yet Christians, and building up people who are.

So *all* of us **work** (unavoidably). But *all* Christians should *also* be involved in Gospel-work. E.g. it's gospel-work when we bring someone along to church or an event, or have a conversation about Jesus with them. It's gospel-work when we encourage families and young people, and when we support those in need in our communities.

But also, it furthers the cause of the gospel if *some* Christians are relieved of having to earn their own living so that they can invest all their time in leading and organizing the work of the gospel. That's the case with e.g. clergy stipends across the Church of England, and how we can ensure all areas of our country, even the most deprived and struggling, can be supported with clergy... and that's the case with much of our mission giving, e.g. the Robinsons in Bangkok. This creates a partnership.

In this past year, we thanked God for his amazing grace in the wonderful response to our stewardship needs. Facing the second year of a big deficit of our income over expenditure, the Spirit filled response enabled us to move to a break-even point – which is where we are now.

To ensure our financial position remains secure, and to enable St Matthew's to re-grow and resource ministry, we need to faithfully continue the restoration of our financial giving to the levels of a few years ago.

We have made a huge first step by balancing the books. But this is, as I say, a first step. There are many more steps of faith to take.

We long to give more support and help to those in society who are most in need, and to share the Good News of Jesus with those around us. The social needs in our own parish are huge and we are praying for God's guidance as to where he is calling us to help.

We long to reach out to all ages, and are mindful of the salutary statistics which show us only too clearly, the reality of a lost generation of young people in the Church today.

We long to be confident and equipped in resourcing and developing more opportunities to explore the Christian faith, and our Alpha course this year is just the beginning of this.

We want to ensure our Grade 2 building is well maintained and fit for purpose – a particular stewardship need the PCC has identified as requiring urgent action – details of which are in my letter to you and in the booklet.

It's an exciting time – with financial needs. The budget you will see in the booklet is the crucial recurring month by month running costs of this parish – the life-blood of our ability to staff, resource and re-grow our ministry and contribute to our communities.

That's the financial side of partnership in the gospel which Paul's on about in vv14-16. The great example, look at the start of v15, is how the Philippians understood right from the start of their Christian lives that to be a Christian is to be a partner in the gospel-business, including a financial partner.

If we have an income, we're to regard that as God-given **giving** power. The Bible tells us at least four uses of money that God wants to see in us; 1) to meet our needs and the needs of our dependants; 2) to meet the needs of others, especially the poor; 3) to pay taxes and 4) to support the work of the gospel.

A giving review is an opportunity to review at least 2 of those.

And can I say that we are *very* thankful to God for the financial as well as practical support of the members of St Matts.

But what Paul is saying here is that the number one thing about these gifts is not that it pays for him and his work. The number one thing about our giving is that it shows genuine spiritual fruit in our lives.

Verse 18 changes the picture to offering a sacrifice to God. The number one thing about this gift is that it shows genuine response to God, a genuine sense that **all we have and are is his anyway**. Any giving is about God first before the church. We love because he first loved us – the amazing grace of God.

Be content in Christ. Be a partner in the gospel.

Finally, BE TRUSTING IN GOD (vv19-20)

Vs. 19-20 teach us that as we give, there's no call to be anxious about our own needs. Having said, v18, that his needs are, '*fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent*', Paul goes on to reassure them about their needs. V. 19:

*'And **my** God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in in glory in Christ Jesus. To **our** God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.'*

The non-Christian environment sees itself as immediately surrounded by circumstances – often hostile and unpredictable. So where do you find security? Our culture's answer is to create around self a financial buffer, or security cushion.

If we see things like this, then giving is crazy, because giving depletes our buffer, taking the filling out of our cushion. To which Paul says: but **we don't** see things as the world sees them. We're *in Christ*. Christ has got us.

The Bible uses that phrase, '*riches in glory*' to refer to God giving his Son to die for us on the cross. And Paul wrote elsewhere:

*'He who **did not spare his own Son**, but gave him up for us all - how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things' (i.e. all things we need in life, this side of heaven)? (Romans 8.32)*

The point Paul is making in v19 is: God has got us – and **He**, in the real world, is ultimate security.

I am on a journey of fresh journey of faith this year...

Be content in Christ. Not in circumstances or standard of living.

Be a partner in the gospel. Which includes being a financial partner.

And be trusting in God. *'And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.'*