

Stand firm in the Lord

Readings: Micah 4:1-6 & Philippians 3:1-4:3

We come to chapter 3 in our studies in the letter of Paul to the Philippians and our theme is “stand firm in the Lord”, taken from Chapter 4 verse 1. It’s not a suggestion, it’s a command from the apostle for all Christians. But I think we need to see that Paul’s command is based upon his train of thought in the previous chapter and what he is telling us there about our Christian life. Unfortunately Paul is a great mixer of metaphors, so here in chapter 4 verse 1 we have stand but we have in chapter 3 much about pressing on in the race. Chapter 3 has some very well-known verses in it and is a rich passage but as I read it I felt we should consider three questions?

- 1) where is our confidence?
- 2) what is our aim in life?
- 3) who are our role models?

1) Firstly, where is our confidence?

The beginning of chapter 3 contains some amazing words from Paul, the converted Pharisee, that really shows how far he had come in understanding the gospel of Jesus the Messiah. Philippians 3:2-3 “Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh. For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh”.

Unity is a frequent theme in this letter but here in chapter 3 Paul is pointing out some dangerous teaching that could bring division. At the beginning of the chapter Paul is telling the Philippians to beware of the circumcision party, those who will insist that to be really incorporated into the Messiah, Gentiles need to be circumcised and observe the law, in other words to become a Jew. At first sight to a converted pagan, this might seem very plausible. After all the gospel was all about Jesus, a Jewish Messiah. All its language was full of words and ideas that were essentially Jewish. Many of the early messengers of the gospel were themselves Jewish, and the Scriptures they quoted from, were the Jewish Scriptures.

I am reminded of the story that Simon Ponsonby, the theologian based at St Aldate’s Church, Oxford, UK, tells of his father. His father was converted after seeing the film *The Robe*, which is a fictional story about those who cast lots for Jesus’ robe at the crucifixion. Simon’s father went into the cinema a non-Christian and came out converted but with no church background. He knew, however, that the Bible had an Old and New Testament. So he thought he would go to the Jewish synagogue on Saturday morning to hear about the Old Testament and to the church on Sunday morning to hear about the New Testament. It wasn’t long before he was asked to leave the Jewish synagogue when he talked about Jesus as the Messiah. But it all seemed so logical at the time to Simon’s father and to those new Gentile Christians in Philippi who might be tempted to follow the circumcision route.

Paul, however, had understood that God had done something amazingly new in the coming of the Messiah, Jesus. Throughout the Old Testament from the giving of the covenant at Mt. Sinai, the Jews were taught that they were the chosen people of God. They were chosen by grace to display the character of God to the surrounding nations. Over the years, particularly after the return from the exile in Babylon, the Jews developed a hard and exclusive attitude to all non-Jews, the Gentiles. Tacitus, the Roman historian, said of the Jews “they regard the rest of

mankind with all the hatred of enemies”. Jews commonly referred to the Gentiles as dogs. We miss the full import of this word as, in our day, dogs are often well groomed, molly-coddled pouches. Dogs in the first century roamed the streets living off any scraps they could find and attacking any unsuspecting people. In other words they weren't particular about their diet, in contrast to the Jews who were very fastidious. But despite all this hostility between the Jews and Gentiles there were indications in the Old Testament that this was going to change.

God's promise to Abram was “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3). God's servant in Isaiah 49 was to “be a light for the nations, that God's salvation may reach to the end of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:6). It's a theme that Simeon took up as he held the infant Jesus in his arms in the Temple that the child would be a light of revelation to the Gentiles (Luke 2:32). Jesus' command to the disciples before His ascension was “go make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:18). Yet how that would all happen was unclear – would all the Gentiles become Jews for example? God had other plans. He was going to incorporate Jew and Gentile into one body in His new covenant people, as He did so clearly in Acts 10 when the Holy Spirit fell upon the Gentile Cornelius and his friends. This was astounding news to the early church who were almost entirely Jewish. As Paul was to gloriously say in his letter to the Ephesians chapter 2 “remember that you (Gentiles) were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:12-14). We read in 1 Peter 2: 9 “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” This is an amazing passage because Peter takes all these phrases used in the OT to describe the people of the Mosaic covenant and applies them to the NT people of God, Jew and Gentile alike. God in Christ Jesus had done a new thing, He had made one people out of all people who acknowledged Jesus as Messiah and Lord. They were the one people of the new covenant.

So now we have Paul, the converted Jew, *par excellence*, describing the circumcision party as the dogs, this is a complete turnaround in his thinking. Not only that but he says the church of God is the circumcision, or as some translations emphasise it, the true circumcision. Circumcision was a physical sign of the old covenant, now says Paul in the new covenant you don't need a physical sign because you have been circumcised in your heart, in your will, by coming under the Lordship of Christ.

Paul's confidence was no longer in what he had achieved in the past, by his past standing. He ticked all the boxes in the Jewish understanding of what a good upright person should be. But when he came face to face with Jesus on the Damascus road, nothing was the same again. There were some things in Paul's past life that were good, his command of the Hebrew scriptures, for example, but Paul is not saying that this was part of the rubbish he was jettisoning. What he was jettisoning was his reliance on his own works, his own standing among his people to justify himself before God.

So bringing our thoughts up to the present, don't be dragged down by your past, the power of the risen Christ can bring you liberty. Paul experienced the explosive power of the Holy Spirit to deliver him from all that bound him up in the

past and to deliver him into new life. His confidence was not in what he had achieved but in what God had achieved for him in Christ Jesus. So may our response to the first question 'Where is our confidence?' be 'on Christ the solid rock I stand'.

2) Secondly, what is our aim in life?

Philippians 3:13-14 "Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

Paul uses the illustration of the athlete running towards the winning post to claim his prize. We are going to see a lot of this in the next few days at the Tokyo Olympics. The image will be before us in many events, the sheer physical exertion to claim a medal. What we don't see is all the training sessions over several years that the athlete went through, the care of their bodies, their diet, their health, their sleep, their sheer, single-minded discipline to be the best they can be, physically and mentally, to hopefully gain a medal. This is the illustration Paul is using. If athletics are not your thing then maybe the picture of cyclists putting their all into a sprint finish at the Tour de France is another illustration. Paul does not say, well I have a lot of knowledge about the Scriptures so I could spend my time on the conference circuit, I am trusting Jesus for my salvation, I've done my dash and now I can just coast along until he calls me home. He has this passion to go on, to learn more of Jesus, to become more like Jesus in his thinking and in his actions, to spread the gospel to lands that have never heard and, even in prison, to passionately care for the young churches he founded,. He has never arrived at maturity, there is always more. For those of us who have been Christians a long time, we need these words to spur us on to become even more mature in Christ. As Robert Murray McCheyne said "Seek to be made holier every day". Zane reminded us a few weeks ago of Jim Elliot, one of the five American missionaries martyred in Ecuador in 1956. Jim wrote "One does not surrender a life in an instant. That which is lifelong can only be surrendered in a lifetime."

So in response to our second question what is our aim in life? May our reply be that I might daily become more like Jesus.

3) Who are our role models?

Philippians 3:17 "Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us."

Be careful who you chose to emulate, that they are helping you towards your goal. Jean talked to us last week about Paul recommending the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus to the church of Philippi. As Christians we seek to follow Jesus and to rely on His Spirit to transform us into His likeness. Sometimes, however, there is a big disconnect between Jesus, a first century Jew, and ourselves living in the twenty-first century. It is helpful for us to have some good examples of Jesus followers in our own day. People who are exposed to the same world, the same problems and temptations that we are exposed to, and yet being faithful to the teaching of Jesus. Now says Paul, be careful who you imitate. They may say all manner of wise sounding words, but look at their lives – do they conform to Christian godliness, does the light of Jesus shine out of them? There were obviously some in Paul's day in verses 18 and 19 who were very far from those we should be emulating.

I've recently been reading a book by Scot McKnight and his daughter, Laura Barringer, called "A church called tov". It's byline is "Forming a goodness culture

that resists abuses of power and promotes healing". The word tov is Hebrew for good. The book was precipitated by several church scandals in the USA, most notably the one at Willow Creek that led to the resignation of its founding and lead pastor, Bill Hybels. Churches should be places of goodness and healing but sometimes our church leaders having begun well, get carried away by their own popularity and success. Instead of being humble servants ready to be corrected, they become above criticism, surrounding themselves by yes men rather than by those who would challenge their behaviour and attitudes. The story of King Uzziah in 2 Chronicles 26 comes to mind, he started off well, seeking God and being instructed in the fear of God but when he was strong, he grew proud to his destruction.

So in answer to our third question Who are our role models? May our answer be - godly Christians who have kept the faith to the end.

We have looked at three key questions this morning, perhaps they have been a little challenging, but as Jean reminds us "what is God saying to us today?" and "what are we going to do about it?"