

**Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> July 2021 Timothy and Epaphroditus as shining stars**  
**Readings: Malachi 3:8-18; Philippians 2:19-30**

**Intro**

We all have family stories, don't we? My Mum liked to share a special memory from a holiday we had together. One afternoon she had gone upstairs for an afternoon 'granny nap', when our five-year old crept quietly into the room, assembled all the soft toys in a row on his bed and began to 'preach' to them. His topic was 'The Church' and he began by asking the assembled teddies and dolls: What is the Church? Getting no reply he repeated the question: "I ask you what is the Church?"

Then he gave them a bit of a prompt: "Is it the building? No it is not the building." (dramatic pause); The Church is not the building – it is the people!"

It was a short sermon, probably the shortest any of the Palmer family have ever preached!

The passage we are looking at this morning is all about people. Paul is not delving deep into theological debate he is talking to the Church, the *ekklesia*, the gathered people of God in Philippi and challenging them to be the people they ought to be so that they might shine as stars in a dark world. This morning, as God's *ekklesia* here at Church on the Hill I would like us to see what we can learn from this passage as we seek to follow Jesus and build community. We are going to look at our calling, our community, our character and our commitment.

Let's pray as we come to God's Word.

Lord take these words of mine and make them your words. Please use them to challenge and encourage us in our Christian walk. Draw us closer to yourself and renew us in your image, we pray. Amen

**Our calling**

First, our calling. Philippi had been established as a Roman colony - a little bit of Rome, distinct from the Greek- speaking culture of Macedonia that surrounded it. But Paul reminds the church that they too are distinct. They are a colony of heaven; living under the Lordship of Christ. He tells the Philippians they are to shine as lights, as stars, in the midst of a twisted and perverted generation. We too are called to be different; to avoid being subtly drawn into the values and attitudes of the surrounding culture but instead to be a sign of light and beauty in a world of darkness and ugliness; to be a beacon of hope in a world that has lost its way.

**Our Community**

But, Paul has a message for the Church community at Philippi. We have already been given some clues that not everything was sweetness and light – Some were following their own agendas; there were murmurings and complaints; and there seem to have been personality clashes even among key workers like Euodia and Syntyche. We have to guard against such things as we move into this new season in our Church life.

When Paul tells them to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling Paul is not here concerned with the eternal welfare of the soul *of the individual*, it is much more likely he is telling them work at achieving the “spiritual well-being of the church as a whole” The church has to take whatever steps are necessary to restore itself to health, integrity, and wholeness. Then they can fulfil God’s purposes; then they can be light-bearers in a dark world. Light and life go together: John 1:4 “In him (Jesus) was life and that life was the light of all mankind.” Paul tells them to hold fast to the word of life Hold fast can also mean hold forth – holding out the Gospel word of life to those around them. If you are that sort of people, that sort of Church, says Paul, then I did not run or labour in vain – it’s all been worth it.

### **Our character**

Today our calling is still the same – to shine like stars in a dark world so what sort of people should we be? We are called to have the mindset of Christ. Let me read again Paul’s words:

<sup>3</sup> Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,

<sup>4</sup> not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

<sup>5</sup> In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:

<sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

<sup>7</sup> rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

<sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Timothy and Epaphroditus exemplified in their own lives what it means to have the mindset of Christ; to live a life of humble obedience, a servant, focused on others’ interests rather than their own. They were fully committed to work of the Gospel, so let’s look at them as models for our own commitment as followers of Christ.

### **Our Commitment**

First, Timothy. Timothy's name crops up quite frequently in the NT so we know a fair bit about him. We know he came from Lystra and had a Jewish mother who had given him a good grounding in Scripture. We know that there was something about Timothy that led his local church to recommend him to Paul – are we on the lookout for new leaders? What qualities are we looking for?

Timothy joined Paul's group of companions and travelled with him to Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth and Ephesus and was now with Paul in Rome. Even though Timothy sometimes comes across as somewhat nervous and unsure of himself, Paul believes in him. It seems that whenever Paul wished for some information from a church or wanted to send them some encouragement, advice, or even rebuke, he would send Timothy if he couldn't go himself.

The two were very close: Paul calls him "his child in the Lord," (1 Cor 4:17). There is an obvious affection here – Timothy is the son Paul never had –but also Paul and Timothy worked together in the same way that, in the past, a father would pass on his trade to his son. It is the same way that Jesus worked with his disciples, an apprenticeship model that we too can use to train up new leaders, and also to help one another to grow in the faith.

So now, Paul plans to send Timothy to Philippi: <sup>19</sup> *Now I hope, under the lordship of Jesus, to send Timothy to you very soon*, he writes. It seems an obvious decision to make but Paul does nothing without consulting his Lord; for Paul, every part of a Christian's life is to be lived under Christ's lordship.

"I am sending Timothy, says Paul because I have no one like him, I have no one else who equally shares my feelings." Timothy has spent so much time with Paul that he knows Paul's mind better than anyone else, and can be trusted to speak for him.

But more than that, Paul knows that Timothy has a genuine concern for their welfare. The word that is translated as genuine suggests kinship, caring for them as another family member would. Timothy, unlike the others is not chiefly concerned with his own interests but in looking after the interests of his Lord, King Jesus. And for him, to serve Jesus and to serve his people are one and the same Jesus himself said: "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." (Matt 25:35-45).

In all this, Timothy has a proven track record in serving alongside Paul; in fact “he worked like a slave” with Paul - *.doulos*, “slave,” is used in Phil 1:1, of Paul and Timothy and of Christ himself in 2:7: “taking the form of a slave”. We often translate it servant but in doing so we lose that sense of being absolutely at our master’s bidding.

So, Paul sees Timothy as someone who exemplifies the same self-giving love and humble obedience as Christ, his Master. He is a good and faithful servant. Our Church runs on people like Timothy.

Paul was hopeful that he might come and see the Philippians himself or, failing that he would send Timothy in his place. But for the time being there were some things that Paul would need Timothy to sort out because Paul was, after all, in chains.

### **Epaphroditus**

Which brings us to Epaphroditus. Over the years the church in Philippi had been very generous in their support of Paul and also contributed to his fund for the Church in Jerusalem. They were a giving Church. They are a good example for us to follow. They had even sent one of their own, Epaphroditus, on the long and difficult journey to Rome to provide for Paul’s financial needs and to give practical help and support. In those days prisoners had to provide everything they needed including meals, so the idea was that Epaphroditus would act as Paul’s personal servant.

We don’t know anything about Epaphroditus apart from what we have here. We know he is from Philippi and Paul describes him as: a brother, a co-worker, and a fellow-soldier as well as being their messenger. He is a brother, a fellow Christian, part of the whanau. He is a co-worker –a word Paul often uses to describe people who have worked with him to spread the gospel – Epaphroditus has a heart for mission.

Epaphroditus is also a “fellow soldier” - a military term, used of those who fight side by side and used specifically here by Paul of those who fought together against the enemies of the gospel. It reminds us it was hard to be a Christian in those days; there was direct opposition as well as social and economic discrimination. Epaphroditus was prepared to bear this cost of following Christ.

Suffering is a theme that is woven throughout the letter and it is likely to be our experience too as we face an environment that is increasingly hostile to Christian beliefs and values. Standing together will be important.

As we have already seen, Epaphroditus was sent to minister to Paul's needs. He is a *leitourgon* a word that in the Jewish Scriptures is associated with the priesthood and the sacrificial system. Paul calls the gift that Epaphroditus brought a "sacrifice" (Phil 4:18), it's not just money but also represents the generous offering up of his life to Christ's service. (See Romans 12:1) Epaphroditus both brought a gift and was himself a gift. We too can support our brothers and sisters elsewhere through prayer and financial help even if we cannot go ourselves.

But things had got complicated. Epaphroditus had become gravely ill, so sick that he almost died. Paul does not tell us what caused this – maybe it was the notorious Roman fever that regularly swept through the city. He just wants to go home; he is homesick and in great distress - in part because he knows the Philippians are worrying about him. So Paul decides to send Epaphroditus home, and he sends him with this letter.

You see it's possible that Epaphroditus will face criticism when he gets back. He may be seen as a quitter, either physically or mentally not up to the task. Paul does not want this to happen; so he tells the Philippians that they are to "welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honour people like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me." The word that Paul uses here is a gambling term meaning to stake everything. It is clear that Epaphroditus was no coward but a courageous person willing to take enormous risks, ready to play with very high stakes in order to come to the aid of a person in need. He did not "save" his life but rather hazarded it to do for Paul and for the cause of Christ what other Philippian Christians did not or could not do.

We have suggested that Timothy and Epaphroditus serve as models for how Christians should live and in fact within the Early Church there were a group of men and women who did that. They called themselves the *parabolani*, 'the gamblers' who dedicated themselves to visit the prisoners and the sick, especially those with dangerous and highly infectious diseases including the plague. Christians became known as those who cared for others.

Barclay suggests that as Christians we should have a similar, almost reckless, courage which makes us ready to take risks, to gamble with our lives in order to serve Christ and our fellow human beings. How many Christians do you know who have done exactly that? A few maybe - and we honour them.

It's a challenge isn't it, but it doesn't have to be some grand gesture. We can probably all think of people who have looked not to their own interests but to the interests of others; who have put their own plans or ambitions on hold, or given them up altogether, in order to serve others. What Paul doesn't want to see is a sort of easy-going Christianity which makes no demands on anyone, apart maybe from turning up each week.

Timothy, Epaphroditus and Paul – in some ways their world is very different to our own but the picture we get of church life is not that dissimilar. Some of Paul's letters are solid, abstract theology, and difficult to understand but here Paul tells us what our calling as individuals and as a community, our character or mindset and our commitment ought to be.

We like Timothy and Epaphroditus are called to shine like stars in a dark place. They followed the path laid down by Jesus; not seeking their own well-being but that of others; prepared to lay down their lives for the gospel. We are all stars who make up the constellation that is the Church. Some of us are bold and bright, some of us less so, and some of us may be invisible to the naked eye (but not to our heavenly Father).

Timothy and Epaphroditus were examples of living out the Jesus mindset. We, as individuals and as a church community are also called to be living examples of Jesus – not a perfect example, but a real one – people are looking for integrity.

So, this coming week let us look for ways in which we can serve one another; support our brothers and sisters around the world (our Rome or Philippi), and reach out to those around us with the gospel, the beacon of light and hope in a dark and deeply confusing world.

Get shining, Church!!

(What is God saying to you? What are you going to do about it?)