

Positive Christianity

12 10 14

Almighty God,
you have made us for yourself,
and our hearts restless till they find their rest in you:
pour your love into our hearts and draw us to yourself
and so bring us at last to your heavenly city
where we shall see you face to face.

Our text this morning is from Paul's letter to the Philippians, chapter 4 verse 7:

‘ . . . the peace of God which surpasses understanding . . . ’

Sunday night; early July; the year 1969; the place, the Strangers' Rest Mission, somewhere in the backstreets of Whitechapel. I'm sitting in the congregation with my friends, Brian and Kathy, listening to the preacher. His text our text today: **'the peace of God which surpasses understanding'**. I'm captured by the prospect of something perfect, something I'd love to have. And from that moment on, my life begins to change.

So here I am with you in Dinard, quite a long way in time and place from the East London of my boyhood. But what has that verse and the little passage from the centre of today's reading from Philippians – verses 4 to 7 – got to say to us ? Essentially, something very positive. If last week's sermon was about striving like a really fit athlete to obtain the victor's crown, today's is more about being at rest,

at peace in oneself, conscious of the presence of God in our lives, his love for us and our on-going dialogue with him.

It starts with the command to **'rejoice'**. Be happy; be content; be joyful ! And not just when things are good and the going is easy but also when things are hard, unpleasant, painful. The imperative here is to be joyful at all times, in all places, in all circumstances. Not easy, well weird, but the key, ultimately, to being at ease: the ability to see underlying good and purpose even in the negative. For me, it's a work in progress.

Then, the invitation to be gentle - **'Let your gentleness be known to everyone'** - show people your soft side. I'm grateful to my mum and dad for naming me Gareth. In Welsh, Gareth means 'gentle' and it makes me smile, given my temper, that my parents should gift me with such a virtue, one of the nine fruits of the Spirit. To be kind, caring and compassionate to those we encounter daily is a real challenge. For me, it's still a work in progress.

Next, the injunction - not to worry about anything. Easier said than done but the encouraging fact is that **'The Lord is near.'** Why don't we need to worry ? Why shouldn't we waste our time worrying ? Simply because God is here with us here and now. At the start of his gospel, Matthew uses the name Emmanuel to describe the Messiah - **Emmanuel - God with us** (1 v23). At the end, Mathew concludes his gospel with the encouraging words of Jesus, **'I am with you always'** (28 v20). So do we need to worry ? No because God is up close and personal,

alongside us even in the dark days and darker nights when we can feel alone, uncared for. I'm working on it.

Fourthly, talking to God, speaking to God, listening to God: **'In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.'** Prayer is all about God-awareness, being still and quiet, listening and talking to him, asking and thanking him. And yes, I am working at it.

And lastly, **'the peace of God'**. We can be at peace because we're centred, at ease in and of ourselves. And why can we be confident? Because Paul shares this fact: the peace of God **'guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus'**. We can be the 'me' we should be because we are Christians in communion with Jesus Christ the Son of God, our Lord, our friend, our Saviour. Again, for me a work in progress!

So let me conclude by affirming the positive nature of Christianity. What Paul shares with us is the prospect of being at peace because we are in a real relationship with Christ. It doesn't mean bad things won't or can't happen to us and to those we love but it does mean we can be positive about what everything ultimately means. And my question – are you too prepared to work at it?

I have spoken in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist
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