

Today we conclude our services in the Season of Creationtide with our annual Harvest Festival at the 11am service.

The letters that Paul wrote to the young churches are not only inspiring about the love of God for humanity but also have practical content which we can apply to our own lives today. This morning, we will go through the Philippians passage that Dara read to us verse by verse. I think you would find it very helpful if you could find page 196 in the New Testament at the back of the pew Bibles and turn to our reading from Philippians chapter 4 verses 4 to 9.

We start at verse 4 with the stirring encouragement, "Rejoice." Throughout human history in all parts of the world, whether the main crop was rice or cassava or rye or barley or potatoes or yams or maize or soyabeans or plantains or wheat, the success of the harvest was vital to the well-being of the people who cultivated and relied upon those crops to promote healthy bodies and flourishing cultures. Celebrations of harvest often went on for days in those times when human beings were not tied to the daily grind of working by the clock. It was a time of rejoicing for singing and dancing.

In rich parts of the world, like our own, we are not so reliant upon the success of the harvest as in pre-industrial times. It is not so easy to draw a direct link between the community celebrations of a successful harvest of the past to the celebrations of abundance and success that we might enjoy today. The best example I can think of community celebrations today are those of students collectively celebrating their achievement in examinations. Of course, there will always be people who feel left out of such celebrations because of disappointment at their results. However within family and friendship groups we can celebrate achievements with thanksgiving after the birth of children, the success of projects at work, whether it be a software development or the completion of a building or infrastructure, a choir or orchestra performing a concert or even, although this will inevitably will clouded by sorrow, thanksgiving for the life of a recently departed loved one. You will be able to think of other things that we can rejoice over as a community. Perhaps none

are as poignant as those harvest celebrations of old that directly determined the well-being of the community for the next few months.

We are only too aware that there are still places in the world that are dependent upon the success of the next harvest. All too often drought, often caused by climate change, and war lead to famine in many parts of the world. Gaza, Sudan, Ethiopia, Syria. The tragedy is the human factor in causing famine. There are logistical problems in transporting food to desperate people, but all too often the problem is political. It is the human will that is the problem. We must repent and do what we can individually so that collectively we ensure that the abundance of our planet reaches everywhere.

Our thoughts about harvest have distracted me from what Paul is saying in

Philippians 4 verse 4. He says rejoice in the Lord always. Paul doesn't just say, "Rejoice", but rejoice in the Lord always. His point is that all times his friends direct their rejoicing to the Lord.

Paul knew that his Philippian friends would face hardships. Paul himself had to face up to hard times. As we see in verses 11 and 12, Paul learned how to face all the vicissitudes of life. "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." The Philippians would have difficult times and so do we all even though we live in a stable country, that by international standards is well-governed, where despite the cost-of-living crisis, nearly all of us have material well-being that is the envy of many around the world. Nevertheless unemployment, mental health crises, severe illness, bereavement and family disappointments are never far away from any of us. Even in those circumstances Paul's encouragement to rejoice in the Lord rings out. He repeats himself. "Again, I will say, 'Rejoice.'" This is not a typically British, "grin and bear it" attitude, this is a call to rejoice in the Lord. This will become more apparent as we consider the next few verses.

We move on to verse 5. "Let your gentleness be known to everyone." Is there anybody in church today who can say that they never get irritated by other people's actions or that there are people that they just don't like? This is Christianity at its most radical. Even as members of a church, where we would hope that people are going to take most notice of such an exhortation it is not

easy to live up to what Paul writes. "Let your gentleness be known to everyone." The joy of the church is that it brings people together from all types of backgrounds. If we join a sports club or a choir or a theatre club or a walking group, then mostly we are joining up with like-minded people. It is usually easier to get on with people who have similar interests to us than with others with whom humanly we have little in common. To some extent that applies in church as well. We meet people with whom we have shared interests, but whatever our backgrounds we have something much deeper uniting us. It is a sharing in the mercy and in the love of God. As Paul writes, "The Lord is near." And that is the incentive we all need to treat each other not only with respect but also to show each other our gentleness.

Verse 6. "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." It is easy to react to this verse by saying that Paul is totally unrealistic. We all have worries of every kind at different stages of our lives. Paul qualifies "do not worry about anything" by saying "but in everything by prayer..." Paul challenges us to turn our worries into our prayers. Of course, this practice takes time and effort, but maybe we can take encouragement from a similar but simple verse in 1 Peter 5 verse 7, "Cast all your anxieties on God, because he cares for you." We all need that reminder, "God cares for us", because it is not easy for us to find the stillness in our lives to tell God about our worries. We are all too busy to carve out time for God in our packed schedules. We

certainly spend time going over our worries again and again but do we take a deep breath, just be still and tell God of our anxieties. Paul gives invaluable instruction on how we go about that prayer. Turn our worries into heartfelt prayer. Very simply let our requests be known to God. In an unhurried way tell God what is on our mind. This is a learning process as is any relationship that we have with another person. We can do this on our own, but we can also pray about something with a friend. Praying with another person can often help us to learn to pray because we use words that we know the other person can understand. Crucially Paul encourages us always to pray with thanksgiving. Giving thanks to God transforms our personalities, it transforms our faces and brings us out of ourselves to deal creatively with others and with God.

Verse 7 “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” We all long for peace. Peace in the world. Peace in our families. Peace in our hearts. When we rejoice, when we show others our gentleness, when we pray with thanksgiving, we are much more likely to know the peace of God in our hearts and in our minds. It is often the decisions that are to be made that disturb our peace. I think this is especially true for those of us who are young in years but also for those who are young in their faith in Christ. We lack experience of life. We don't know God well. The consequences of the choices we make are much greater than they are later in life. We spend wakeless nights not knowing which way to go. I love what it says in verse 7 that the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. I also love what Colossians 3 verse 15 says, “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.” The more we spend time with Christ the more we will learn to recognise his ways and allow his peace to guide our decisions. It is true that we often have to take a decision without knowing for sure that it is the right way, but as we learn to trust that God cares for us in our anxieties, we learn that he loves us in all circumstances, we will enjoy his peace as we take steps forward in life.

Paul starts verse 8 with the word, “Finally”. He is hoping that we will live in accordance with the previous sentences and considers how we are to continue in following Christ. He encourages his friends to focus on whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, of excellence, worthy of praise to think about these things. This does not mean we imbibe only religious material. Good music, literature, theatre, film all nourish our minds and our spirits. Paul encourages us to think about the things that we watch and read. The things that we talk about. The stories that we hear about. These all have an impact on us. If there is any doubt about that, think about what we choose to look at on the internet. The internet feeds that pop up on our devices respond to the choices that we have made as we surf the internet. It is almost as if we see ourselves as God sees us. Can we all say that what we allow our minds and hearts to feed on, builds us up our character, makes us stronger mentally and emotionally and brings us closer to God?

There is a parallel of sorts between verse 9 and our gospel reading. In his letter Paul writes that the Philippians keep on doing the things that they have learned and seen in him. In the gospel reading Jesus encourages his friends to come to him as the Bread of Life. We may think that Paul is being overly authoritative, but he knows that the lifestyle and trust in God he is encouraging is radically different from the culture in which they have been brought up. They need a practical example to live life as a follower of Jesus Christ. Jesus does that and much more in the gospel reading which takes place after the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus is educating his followers that life is not about the food that they have. Life is not about the riches and the well-being that they may achieve in life it is about finding life in him. He calls himself the Bread of Life. He promises that whoever comes to him will never be hungry or thirsty. The life Jesus speaks of, is having a personal relationship with him. It means coming to him with all our worries, in a spirit of thanksgiving and trusting that he will continue to love us as we step forward in our lives.