**11th October 2020**

**Call to worship**

Rejoice in the Lord always;
again, I say: REJOICE!



**Lord Jesus Christ you have come to us**: Claire introduce hymn

**A gathering prayer**

Lord God, faithful and loving,
we do not always feel like rejoicing.
Even as we gather to worship you,
our minds are sometimes distracted and elsewhere,
weighed down by the burdens of our lives.
Help us, in this moment, to find it within our hearts
to REJOICE in your constancy and loving care for us.
People of God, let us rejoice.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of approach**

Lord God, we never know what the future holds or where life will take us next.
We never know what is just around the corner and what the outcomes of things will be.
But we know that whatever follows on from this moment, you are here with us, by our side, above and beneath us, entwining your life with ours, surpassing all human understanding.
In this moment, bless us and awaken us to your abiding presence.
**Amen**.



**A prayer of confession**

Eternal God, so often we give up if something goes wrong or doesn’t go our way.
So often we are overwhelmed by our own problems that we forget to look out for others.
So often we are consumed with negatives and endings that we lose sight of the positives and beginnings.
Eternal God, forgive us for our self-centredness, our blindness and our deafness, and reawaken your Spirit within us.
**Amen**.



**A prayer of praise and thanksgiving**

For eternal hope that comes from you, almighty God,
**we give you thanks and praise.**
For your gentleness and compassion…
For your peace within…
For your light in the darkness…
For hope when all seems hopeless…
For love beyond measure…
**Amen.**

Lord’s Prayer

Baptism of Alena

Reception of New Members

Song: Our God is Love

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFU4Y0mr4Dg&app=desktop>

**Philippians 4**

How do you stand firm in the Lord? How do you ensure your faith flourishes and grows?

That is the apostle Paul’s dearest wish as he concludes his letter to the Philippians, a letter that we have been looking at for the last few weeks.

These five people who we have received into membership today, some have been walking the way of Jesus for many years and have kept going, some are just starting out. For all of us, are we open to advice on how to keep going in faith.

To stand firm is drawn from the same language as that of a soldier standing fast in the shock of battle. There are many challenges on our faith as we live in this world and Paul is concerned that these Christians win that victory.

So, let’s look at Paul’s suggestions:

First, he says **watch your relationships with other Christians**.

A couple of weeks ago we looked at how Paul likened Christians at Philippi to a Greek and Roman phalanx standing shoulder to shoulder. They were virtually invincible provided they did not break rank. The enemy is always looking for divisions and cracks to exploit. One of the most common causes of division and splits in the church is personality clashes.

Here Paul lists two women Euodia and Syntyche who seem to have fallen out with each other. Paul does not take sides (which suggests it wasn’t a doctrinal dispute). Rather he urges both of them to take the initiative in order to reach agreement and he appeals to others to help bring them together. He doesn’t criticize them; rather he concentrates on their good points to build them up – they have contended by his side and their names are in the book of life he says (verse 3).

Paul is aware that even trivial personality clashes can lead people away from the Lord.

A few years ago, I came across some one who used to go to church. I asked what put them off. They said that one of the church members had looked at him in a dismissive way. I said did you speak to this person. He said he did, and she apologized for any misunderstanding. ‘Their apology wasn’t enough?’ I enquired. ‘No, I didn’t believe them’ he replied. ‘Oh’, I said despairingly.

We need to watch carefully our relationships with other Christians. While disagreements, disunity and unforgiveness can weaken the church and even destroy our faith, the warmth of close Christian friendships strengthen the church, builds our faith and is one of the vital secrets for standing firm in the Lord.

Not being able to physically meet is a challenge in this pandemic. We can come to church now. We can still meet in virtual settings – so I encourage to do what you can to keep in fellowship somehow.

Secondly Paul encourages us to **watch our relationship with the Lord.**

Obviously, the key to standing firm in the Lord is our relationship with the Lord. How can we stay close?

Paul give three invaluable tips:

**Enjoy the Lord**. Sixteen times Paul urges the Christians at Philippi to *rejoice in the Lord*. Paul never denies the problems, but he does encourage them to rejoice in the midst of difficulties. This might sound trite and even masochistic. But remember that Paul is saying this from a prison cell where he has been beaten up, falsely accused and awaiting trial and even execution. Yet he still wants to rejoice in the Lord.

It is said that the optimist sees the doughnut, the pessimist sees the hole. There is something to be said for Christian optimism but that is not what Paul is speaking about here. However bad our circumstances are there is one thing we can always rejoice about: The Lord: his love, his mercy, his promises, and his presence.

Like last week when he asked the question where does our confidence come from? – however good our circumstances are our chief ground of rejoicing should not be those, but the Lord. It is right of course to count your blessings, to rejoice in a happy marriage, a happy family, a fulfilling job, fruitful ministries etc., but Paul says our supreme ground for rejoicing shouldn’t be those things but the Lord because those things are fragile whereas if the joy of the Lord is our strength we have a solid anchor in our spiritual lives.

Secondly **expect the Lord**. *The Lord is near* he writes in verse 5. This is a reason for patience: Let your gentleness be evident to all. He writes. The word for gentleness means moderation or graciousness. It is the opposite of contention, abrasiveness, and self-seeking desires. It means willing to forgo retaliation. There is no need to defend ourselves because the Lord is near – God will vindicate us in due course.

Paul probably expected Jesus to return imminently which gave him an expectancy – just as say people get excited when they know a famous celebrity or a member of the royal family is coming to visit their town. But the Lord is near in the sense that God is present through the Spirit. We sense God’s presence, speak to God, hear God speaking to us and nudging us in the way forward. Abiding in God’s presence is one of the keys to standing firm in the Lord.

Thirdly, **Entreat the Lord**.

Paul writes ‘*Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.****7****And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.’*

Winston Churchill said ‘I have had a lot of trouble in my life, most of which never happened.’ Worry can wreck our lives. Prayer and worry are not easy bedfellows. Paul urges us to pray in every situation. When things are going well, and things are difficult. We need to be specific: by prayer and petition, present your requests to God. Sometimes it helps to have a prayer journal or diary to write things down. This helps concentration but also enables you to look back and see in what ways God has responded to those prayers. As you give thanks it can increase confidence in praying further.

One lovely example of where religion and science have come together in the hope of fighting Covid-19 is in Kansas, in the US, where doctors and religious leaders are carrying out [**a trial of prayer for Covid-19 patients in intensive care**](https://clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT04361838).[[1]](#endnote-1)

This is no Mickey Mouse trial either. A double blind randomized controlled trial of 1,000 patients, trials don't get much more scientifically robust than that. Now I suspect that most patients would be a little concerned if on the morning ward round their doctors dropped to their knees and started calling out for God's intercession. It certainly wouldn't fill you with optimism.

In this trial, however, the prayer is done remotely - a universal prayer from five denominations (Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism) with the control group just getting standard medical care. Medics are constantly searching for more effective treatments, so let's wait and see whether prayer is as effective as dexamethasone that caused President Trump to say that Covid 19 has been a blessing to him from God.

A previous scientific study[[2]](#endnote-2) had concluded that remote, intercessory prayer was associated with lower Critical Care Unit course scores. This result suggested that prayer may be an effective adjunct to standard medical care. But we knew that already!

The extraordinary and wonderful promise is that as we hand over these anxieties to God, we will receive the peace of God that transcends all understanding. The word for peace is far more than the absence of hostilities. It means wholeness, soundness, wellbeing, oneness with God. It transcends the understanding of others, in that they cannot understand how we can be so peaceful when going through major worries and anxieties. [[3]](#endnote-3)

Stuff maybe worrying – but our faith tells us we are not in it alone: the Lord is near – there is always hope and even the worst that can happen to us, death itself, won’t have the last word. The peace of God can guard our hearts and minds, like a sentry duty guarding the city gates from attacks that may lead to our defeat and collapse.

Watch your relationships with other Christians, watch your relationship with the Lord.

Thirdly Paul says **watch your unseen thoughts**.

What we think is more important than who we are and what we have. It has been said, ‘We are not what we think we are, but what we think, we are’. What we think will affect every area of our lives. A lot of counselling is based on Cognitive Behavioural Therapy which is about examining your thought processes and how they affect your mood and actions. Changing your thinking literally changes your life.

Another saying goes:

‘sow a thought, reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character, reap a destiny’.

Knowing the importance of our thoughts Paul urges us to set our minds on the right things; on things that are ‘true’ as opposed to lies and falsehood, on ‘whatever is noble’ - things that are morally good; on what is ‘right and just’ on things that are ’pure’ in terms of motivation; on things that are lovely and attractive; on things that are admirable in the sense that they have a high tone and are of good repute. He summarizes the list by saying ‘if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things’.

It is hard to think like that because the world we live in is quite different. We are surrounded by images and words from TV, social media, films, advertising, newspapers which can easily lead us in a different direction. We start watching programs on the TV and pretty soon we think this doesn’t fit with these criteria. People may throw their arms up and say ‘censorship’. I will throw my hands up and say ‘soul-ship’: what is good for your soul? Be discerning.

Martin Luther famously said ‘you can’t stop a bird flying overhead. But you can stop it nesting in your hair’. Get bad stuff out and good stuff in. Yes, we are called to discern and censor.

Rotten roots to our lives are like the roots of a tree which will determine our ability to withstand the storms of life.

Finally, Paul says **watch the example of other Christians**.

Paul is not ashamed to put himself forward as an example to be followed.

*Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.* Verse 9

Paul encourages them to not only follow his teaching but also his lifestyle. No ‘do what I say not as I do’ here!

Well its not wrong to model our lives on those of other Christians whom we respect and admire, provided that they are modelling their lives on Jesus.

I have found in my own life that the lives of Christian friends have been a great influence on me. In some cases it has been their family life that has been the model; in others it has been their generosity, and use of their time and wealth; in others their prayer life, their love, their way of handling others and their faith. I don’t say that I have lived up to their examples, but I think that their examples have inspired me to go on in faith. Occasionally I have been let down by other Christians. They have done stuff which I think was not of Jesus. We all need to be forgiving because we are all fallible and sinful. You do need discernment. But then Paul urges us to put it into practice.

We must practice avoiding quarrels and staying united with other Christians. We must practice avoiding worry and anxiety by bringing it all to the Lord in prayer. We must practice thinking about the good things. We must practice what we see in the lives of godly people. If we do, then Paul promises that ‘the God of peace’ will be with us.

Stand firm in the Lord and may the God of peace be with you.

Bibliography Nicky Gumbel, A Life Worth Living, Hodder, 2018

**Prayers of intercession**

O God, we come to pray not for ourselves, but for each other – for those we know and those we don’t, for situations we understand and for those that confound us.

The news tells us of trauma and heartache across the world and we try to grasp the intensity of it all.
**Bless, O Lord, all involved in the hurting and the healing**.
We hear of death and dying, of grieving and weeping…
We hear of pain, scarring and disfigurement…
We hear of anguish and confusion…
We hear of those in need of help, and those who struggle to
find it…
We hear of the grieving and the sorrowful…
We hear of the lost and the alone…
And we know, Lord, there are myriad others known only to you.
**Bless them all in their hurting and their healing. Amen.**





**A prayer for all ages together**

We travel the journey of life but do not go alone,
**for the Lord is with us**.
We travel the journey of life with thankful hearts,
**and the Lord is with us**.
We travel the journey of life with each other,
**and with the Lord, who is always with us. Amen.**

**Notices**

**Hymn: O Jesus I have promised**



**A sending out prayer**

Stand firm in the Lord and the God of peace be with you and the blessing of God father Son and holy Spirit be with you now and always

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-54344749> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/10547166/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8NK1jQM-Gwk&feature=youtu.be> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)