

Worshipping God Together

Call to worship

Minister: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of
 my heart be pleasing in Your sight

All O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer

MP 16 All my hope on God is founded

Opening prayer and the Lord's Prayer

The Psalmist says: "We will thank you Lord, with all our hearts, because of your constant love and faithfulness."

Let us pray:

Lord God

be with us as we learn to run the race of faith.

O Christ who redeemed us to be your followers,

be with us as we learn to run in your footsteps.

O Holy Spirit who strengthens us when we grow faint,

feed us with the living bread

and bring us always to the living waters

so that we may be refreshed and run and not grow weary.

We ask all of this in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread;

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever. Amen.

Children's Address: Janice Anderson

MP 225 He's got the whole world in His hands

Reflecting on God's Word

Reading: Philippians 3:12 – 21 (NT page 1180)

Reader: Andrew Thomson

Background to the reading

Paul was in prison whilst writing this letter to the congregation in Philippi. Paul had a very special place for this congregation in his heart. It was the only

congregation that helped him financially with contributions which he greatly acknowledged and appreciated. Philippi was also the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia ten miles inland from the modern port city of Kavalla (or in ancient times called “Neapolis”).

In the time of the Emperor Augustus this city became a Roman colony, with a military settlement of Roman soldiers. It was a “miniature Rome,” under the municipal law of Rome, and governed by military officers, who were appointed directly from Rome. It is no wonder that Paul uses so many “military phrases and terms” because his readers would understand it. The congregation was formed by Paul and Silas when they preached there and it was the first church on the continent. Although the Macedonian converts were, as a class, very poor according to 2 Cor. 8:2, their poverty did not keep them from financially supporting Paul’s ministry.

But despite being in prison under very harsh circumstances, PAUL reiterates several times IN THE LETTER that they must be joyful in the Lord. The word that is translated with joy “χαίρω” does not mean shallow happiness or describes the absence of emotional distress.

Although he had more than enough reason to sulk and to moan, he did not. Instead of feeling sorry for himself, he was thinking of others. Instead of focussing on his own problems and troubles, he was thinking of the needs of this congregation in Philippi AND he knew where his true hope was founded.

Our reading is in many ways an explanation of why Paul could manage to carry on with his ministry despite all the challenges he faced on a daily level.

Paul’s life was fuelled by his faith, hope and love in the Lord. He experienced a deep peace within himself. Paul could look at his circumstances with the knowledge that He can trust the Lord. He also had peace with God and therefore with others as well. He managed to see the Sovereign Lord above all his trying circumstances. He trusted God’s control over him. He worked very hard to keep his faith in the Lord alive. We can hear this even in our reading this morning.

He says his ministry and life of faith is like running a race where he only sees the finishing line where is Christ waiting for him in God’s eternal kingdom. Paul was off course referring to something that was well known in his day. The Olympian games were the chief national festival of the Greeks, being given in honor of Zeus at Olympia every four years, and were chiefly gymnastic, though equestrian and musical contests were added. There were also other games but athletic games were

especially favored by the Greeks but less favored by the Romans. The Romans favored those contests that involved danger and bloodshed. Usually the prize for the winners was only a wreath of leaves, such as olive or laurel, but great honor was shown them by their fellow citizens.

And then he urges them to live by his example, to do the same! Ancient teachers often urged their disciples or pupils to follow their example. He does not want them to go astray as Paul rightly point out as some people do. When he speak of his tears he actually is saying that he speaks with love and compassion.

Paul then continues with what he means with the enemies of Christ. Greco-Roman philosophers and non-Palestinian Jewish writers repeatedly railed against those ruled by their passions, often remarking that they were ruled by their “belly” or their “appetite”, disdaining their neglect of eternal things. Gluttony especially became part of Roman culture, and was especially practiced by the aristocracy. Paul means with “being ruled by one’s stomach” more than gluttony; it was used to mean any fleshly indulgence.

Citizens of Philippi, a Roman colony, were automatically citizens of Rome, sharing all the rights and privileges of Roman citizens even though most of them had never been there. Likewise Paul is saying that everyone who believes in the saving grace of Jesus Christ, is citizens of heaven even though they have never been there before.

And in heaven the bodies of the believers will be transformed into “heavenly bodies”.

Paul was telling them in no uncertain terms that the goal of the race of faith - heaven would be far more glorious than any earthly price!

Sermon

The text for the sermon is :¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

I think the metaphor of running a race is quite fitting since the whole country is in Olympic mood. And we know exactly what goes on before any race – a lot of practice. You cannot just appear on the morning of the race and think you can run and win. There is a lot of coaching involved and hours of planning – eating the best possible food so that your body can perform optimal and getting enough rest before the race.

When Paul compares living a life of faith with such a race is also clear to us all. The race of faith is similar in many ways but also different. It is different because everyone who has faith are winners. Christ made it possible through his sacrifice on the cross and his resurrection from death. Everyone who accepts his grace and mercy will indeed inherit his kingdom and become citizens thereof.

But it is similar in the sense that we need to practice our faith. And the only way is to read from the Bible as frequent as possible and listen to what the Lord is telling us to do. We need to love like He loved us – love that sacrifices, love that always forgives, love that goes beyond borders, creed, culture, race, gender and doctrine. We need to speak to God as often as we can and let others know that God answered our prayers. To live faith is not easy just like it is not easy to run any marathon. But we have God through his Holy Spirit urging us onwards, encouraging us to complete the race. Although we experience hardship, challenges, illness, loss of life, tragedy and sadness – we have the hope of the finishing line where Christ will await us all.

And none of us run in the same way or manner. Some people seems to run exceptionally well when there are murderous heights while others like myself is not really a runner at all. I guess the same is true of faith as well. Our faith cannot be measured by any other human beings. Faith is not something that can be achieved through human effort. Faith is a gift from God and when someone do proclaim it, it comes from His Holy Spirit. Faith is trusting on God when all other help fails. And some people can hold on to their faith when challenging times arose while others struggle. It is then that those who excel can help the brother and sister in faith who struggles.

I remember the most striking example of this in a marathon in South Africa. There was this team of runners who was the winners by far but close to the finishing line one of their members collapsed. Then, all of a sudden the whole team stopped and helped him up and started carrying him to the winning line. I think they were the real winners although according to the eyes of the world they were not winners at all. I guess this is a clear example of how God expects us to run the race of faith. It is not about us, or our glory but the grace of God who helps us to live by faith!

May God through His Son Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit encourage us when we are ready to give up,
Help us to find stamina at the finish and speed at the start,

Fire us up with the passion and commitment of all true athletes and may we run until we gain that prize that is eternal!

Amen

Responding to God's word

Our offerings are given for the ministry and mission of the church while we sing "MP 263 I am weak but Thou art strong".

Prayer of thanksgiving: Andrew Coutts

MP 269 I do not know what lies ahead

Benediction RECEIVE THE BLESSING OF GOD AND GO IN PEACE:

May God, who shows us the way,
grant us the strength to finish the race, courage to speak, wisdom to be silent and
faith to continue to the end.

And the blessing of God almighty,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

Be with you all

Now and for evermore

Sung Amen

Please remain standing as The Bible is removed.