Behind the Scenes of Debt

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Preacher: The Rt. Revd Peter Hancock

[0:00] Clive Russ, thank you for the privilege of coming. Jen, I always look forward to joining you here at Christ Church and to those who were confirmed this morning. Bless you for your testimony and for the encouragement that is to me as we go on our way, but the encouragement that is, I'm sure, to everyone who was here this morning.

Those up in the gallery up there in the heavens and those of us down here in the church. So bless you for taking that step forward in your Christian life. And as you can probably hear, I've been doing far too much laughing and preaching and speaking over Christmas.
My voice disappeared about three weeks ago. And, you know, like all things, it's like my wallet and my car keys. I just can't remember where I've put it. So I've lost it. I don't know quite when I'll find it again.
But that's good news for you because it means that I'll avoid the temptation of speaking and preaching too long, I hope, this morning. I did hear recently of a wonderful story of a bishop who was preaching away in his cathedral.
And he was just warming up to his theme. And after about an hour and a half, he was just coming around to the first of his points when he saw a gentleman in the back there get up and start walking out.
[1:08] And he said, excuse me, sir, I'm sorry, I'm in the middle of my sermon. And the gentleman said, I'm sorry, Bishop. He said, I need a haircut. And the bishop said, well, sir, shouldn't you have thought of that before you came to church?

To which he replied, well, before I came to church and you started your sermon, I didn't need the haircut. But folks, I'll try not to keep you. But we've got a great passage that was well read for us a moment ago.
And I said to Clive, I sent him an email and left a phone message on his answer phone this week. When I go to a church, I think there's 562 of them in the diocese. Wherever I go on a Sunday, people always say, do you want to change anything?
And I say, no, I'll come and do whatever you ask me to do. I'm very happy to do that. And this is the first time since I've been in the diocese. I said, Clive, I'm not going to preach on this passage.
I said, I didn't quite say because it was an answer phone. And he said, this is a complete shocker. But I know you're in the middle of a sermon series thinking about meeting with God, thinking about giving.
[2:12] So I am actually going to use our passage this morning. And it comes from a letter of Philippians, which for many people is their favorite letter, their favorite epistle, their favorite writing of Paul in the whole of the New Testament.

And I think that's often because it's described as an epistle filled with joy. I think the word joy comes more times in the letter to the Philippians than any other letter.
And you think, well, what was Paul on that he wrote a letter that was all about joy and rejoicing? Well, what was he on? He was on bread and water. He was in prison.
He was in Rome. And he was probably chained to a guard. He was languishing and regretting the freedom that had been taken from him. And yet it's in Philippians, we get the words, rejoice in the Lord always.
And again, I say, rejoice. And of all the letters, I think it's the most personal and it's the most warm in its tone. And there's this deep, deep affection between Paul and the Christians that he writes to in Philippi.
[3:25] Anyway, it's not actually his last letter. We think that was to Timothy. But as he pens his last letter, probably to the Philippians, and I suspect reading it again, that he probably knew this

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was the last time he was going to write to them.

He sends them a word. And it comes around three G's. The last two verses of Philippians are about three wonderful G's. It's the words, greetings, grace and glory.
He sends greetings to them. He sends greetings from the saints who are with him. He sends greetings from Caesar's household. And he receives greetings back.
He speaks about glory. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen. He gets so excited that at the end of our reading it says amen.
And then he adds another bit on and puts another amen. He just couldn't quite finish the letter. Because he so wants them to know that this is about the glory of God.
[4:28] And that was the joy to hear in your testimonies. That for you, it's wanting to give glory to God in your life. And it's about grace.

That's the other great word with James, his epistle. And it's grace that brings you to faith. It's grace that brings all of us to faith. It's by grace.
Grace from the Lord Jesus Christ. That we can call God our Father. That we can know Jesus as our friend and our Lord and our Saviour. We all remember the mobile phones that were the size of a brick.
And it's actually great that they're getting a bit thinner and smaller. And as well as being used to 3G, we've now most of us got used to 4G. And so there is a fourth G in this book of Philippians.
And he begins with greetings, he ends with greetings. He begins with grace, he ends with grace. He begins with glory, he ends with glory. And the other word is gratitude.
[5:31] He begins Philippians with these incredible words. He says, I thank God for our partnership that we've had in the Gospel from the very first day until now.

He says, thank God for your faithfulness. Thank God for your joyfulness. Thank God for the trust that you've put in Christ. And so he begins with gratitude. And those funny verses, those 10 verses read so well for us by Jess a moment ago.
I'd never preached on them before. I'd never really read them before, I don't think. But actually it's a thank you note. I'm sure after Christmas, one of the things that we all had to do on Boxing Day or the few days' answer was to write that thank you letter to the aunt, grandmother, friend, sister.
And it's a lovely thing to write a thank you note and thank others for the gifts they give us.
Philippians ends with a thank you note. That's basically what that reading was.
And it begins with these words. I rejoice greatly in the Lord. He thanks them for who they are.
[6:39] He thanks them for their faith. And he rejoices greatly in the Lord. Possibly in the dark. Almost certainly in prison. With visitors coming to him.

But hours spent in loneliness. And that feeling of lostness that must have overwhelmed him. And yet he says, I rejoice greatly in the Lord.
Your fellowship refreshes my fellowship. Your faith strengthens my faith. Your grace brings God's grace to me. And I thank you for it, is what Paul said.
He was clearly facing terrible difficulties and terrible sufferings. And he rejoices that they are loyal to Christ.
He says, I brought the good news to you. And you know what? Now you're bringing the good news to me. And my heart rejoices.
[7:40] I rejoice greatly in the Lord. And I think one of the reasons why Clive and Russ chose this passage with a book that I think some of you might be reading. It's because of verse 12.

When Paul says something remarkable. Remembering again where he is in prison. I've learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.
It's worth just reading that again and letting those words sink into our minds and our hearts. I have learned the secret, said Paul, of being content in any and every situation.
I know what it is to be rich. I know what it is to be poor. I know what it is to be well fed. I know what it is to be hungry. I know what it is to drink freely.
I know what it is to be thirsty. And everywhere and anywhere and in everything, said Paul, I've learned to trust God.
[8:47] And that word contentment is a word that actually we don't hear very much about. It's not a value that our society seems to value. And yet for the society in which Paul grew up, contentment was one of the great virtues.

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I'm sure we've all heard of Socrates, who was a Stoic. And for the Stoics, contentment was one of the greatest virtues that there could be. And they sought to acquire it by stripping things out of their lives.
They taught that contentment was not consisting in possessing much, but in wanting little. Not in possessing much, but actually wanting little.
And some of that has passed, I think, into Christianity. We know that true riches, true wealth, true joy, true grace, does not come through the piling in of possessions.
We know people and we see a world in which people are seeking to acquire more and more. People are acquiring more and more riches.
[9:57] That's their ambition and their goal. And yet when you speak to others, when we think of our own lives, we know that that does not bring contentment. It's getting rid of envy.

It's getting rid of jealousy. It's setting aside those sins and our failings that brings us peace with God, peace with our neighbours, peace with one another, and peace within our own hearts.
Having a very, very, very big bank balance, it seems, does not help you sleep well at night. Paul says, I've learnt the secret of being content in any and every situation.
But this is a virtue that doesn't come through striving or through work. Paul says this is a gift from God. Paul was clearly not a stoic.
He's not trying to get to heaven in his own strength. He's not trying to make his life better. What he's learnt is that God is there by grace, sharing his glory and his love and his compassion.
[11:12] Paul says, I'm okay. And I'm okay in everything because Christ is with me. And that was the joy again of the testimonies of those who were stepping forward in confirmation this morning to hear them say that Christ is there with them.

I'm okay, said Paul. Not only because Christ is with me, but because Christ gives me strength. And the word that was used, the word we find often in the New Testament, is the word dunamis.
He gives me dynamic power. He gives me energy. He gives me strength. And so Paul said, and tucked away at the end of Philippians, there it is.
And Clive reminded us of it in the start of our service. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.
And I'm sure that's a verse that others have drawn upon throughout their lives. It was a verse that changed the life of Oliver Cromwell.
[12:19] Oliver Cromwell was a hard man. And he had the tragedy of seeing his son die. And he went into a deep, deep, deep blackness.

He writes about an utter misery and complete desperation. As indeed he would do at the death of his much-loved son.
And then he says that this one verse, I can do everything through him who gives me strength. He said that verse saved my life. He said it came as a beam of light into a dark place.
That's glory. And that's grace. God reaching down to Oliver Cromwell in his lostness, his sadness, his bereavement. God reaching down to his world as we prayed just now.
God reaching down into his world with the love of Christ. And it is for that reason that Christ came.
Now Paul had ambitions.
[13:28] He had ambitions that would terrify any of us. His ambition was this. He said, I want to know Christ and I want to make him known.

And it was that that took him through the mountains and the storms and the shipwrecks and the beatings and the imprisonments and the rods and the loneliness and the hunger and all that he went through.
He had that overwhelming ambition. He said, I want to know Christ. I want to make Christ known. And I want to know the power of his resurrection. He wrote, I can do everything through him who gives me strength.
And he said that because he had met the risen Lord and he knew that he had within his own life the gift of God, the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift that comes through resurrection.
Those words come to challenge our very materialistic world. We need to learn, as a world, that we don't get closer to God by acquiring things.
[14:36] We get closer to God by surrendering things, by surrendering our lives to Jesus Christ.
These words that were read for us just a moment ago are a challenge to our world and they're a challenge to us.

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And so as Paul ends his last letter to the Philippians who he loved, he rejoices in their faith and as he closes this epistle, as he closes with a thank you note and an autobiography, as he sits in prison, as he thinks about his own life, he realises he has an unshakable faith, unshakable because he has a contentment that comes from God.
He ends with a word to the Philippians. And may that be a word to us as we go on our way from church today. This is what Paul wrote.
This is what he wanted them to hear. This is what he wanted them to believe. He ended with these words. And my God will meet all of your needs according to the glorious riches in Christ Jesus.
And my God will meet all of your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. And then he wrote the word.
[15:57] Amen. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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