

Complete Joy

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service for April 20th, 1997.

The preacher is Paul Barker, preaching from Philippians 2, verses 1-11. The sermon is entitled, Complete Joy.

I'm not sure what you're like with riddles. When I lived in England, my sister had a riddle with friends at work that they couldn't solve, so she actually wrote it to me to see if I could solve it.

And I couldn't solve it, and all my friends in England couldn't solve it, and to this day I don't think I know anybody who solved it. Indeed, I've forgotten what it was now, because it's a few years ago. And if I could remember, I was thinking of ringing my sister, but this was about midnight last night when I was finishing this sermon, and I thought it might have been a bit too late for her.

But I want to start with a riddle. The way to up is down, and the way to down is up. Has my vicar gone mad after being here for a year?

[1 : 11] You're all thinking. The way to up is down, and the way to down is up. Well, Philippians 2 gives us an answer to this riddle. You might think, how on earth does that fit into the reading you've just heard?

Well, I hope by the end of this sermon you'll understand that. And you may like to follow the passage that I'm preaching on, page 954, towards the back of the Black Bibles.

It's important that we understand the very first word of this chapter. If. If. You might think, well, that's a fairly basic word. My vicar really has flipped it, if he's going to worry about a two-letter word like that.

But actually it can mean two things. If such and such is the case, but we don't know whether it will be or is. Or if, as indeed is the case.

And that's what's happening here. Rather, we should really translate it as since. Paul's writing to a church in a place called Philippi in North Greece. And he's saying that amongst them there are four things that are true.

[2 : 16] Since these things are true, he says. Since there is some encouragement in Christ. Since there is some consolation from love. Since there is some sharing in the spirit.

Since there is compassion and sympathy. Then, logically, the demand that comes must follow.

That's the argument that he's got here. Since these four things exist amongst you.

Then, what I'm about to urge you to do. Logically must follow from the things that already exist.

What are these four things that exist? Some encouragement in Christ.

Literally the idea is of something that is comforting. Or reassuring. It's a fairly gentle connotation, I think. Paul is saying that amongst Christian fellowship.

And amongst the fellowship of Christians at Philippi. There is comfort from Jesus Christ. That gentle comfort that comes to those who know their sins are forgiven. The gentle comfort that comes from Christ.

[3 : 14] When needs are met and daily bread provided. The comfort that comes from Christ. That invites us to new life. Paul says, yes, that is already in your midst. You have that.

As Christian people, you know what it is. To receive the comfort or the encouragement from Christ. And yes, there is also some consolation from love. That's God's love that's being spoken about.

That they have received God's love. They know that gentle voice that speaks to their sorrows and speaks to their hearts. The gentle voice of God's love that speaks to loneliness or despair.

Yes, as Christian people, the Philippian Christians know that consolation of God's love. The encouragement of that as well. But more than that, they also know the sharing in the spirit.

Literally the words fellowship. A word that we somehow debase when we think of fellowship means a cup of tea after church. But yes, as Christian people, they share in the Holy Spirit of God.

[4 : 12] For after all, every Christian has God's Holy Spirit within them. As a gift from God. As part of reassuring Christians that they belong to him.

As part of giving God's gifts to his people. And so on. Yes, these Christians, like any Christians, share in the spirit. It brings them together. It's a common sharing amongst Christian people. Bringing unity. Or the unity that comes from the spirit. But more than that, they also know the compassion and sympathy that comes from God. The connotation of the word compassion is to do with mercy.

For these are people who have known the mercy of God to bring them forgiveness of their sins. They know that there's no other way indeed to receive God than to receive his mercy for sins forgiven.

They're the things that these Philippian Christians know. Indeed, they're things that all Christians know. It's a beautiful picture of what being a Christian is. A very gentle and warm picture.

[5 : 16] Christians are those who have received the comfort of sins forgiven. Who've experienced the love of God and his acceptance of them. Who've received Christ's own spirit within them.

Dwelling in them. Giving them reassurance and gifts. And growing them to maturity. And they are people who've received God's mercy. All four things are true for people who are Christians. Not just one or the other. But all four. They're not optional extras for Christians. They're of the essence of what it means to be a Christian. And if there are those of you here today who do not know any of those four or only some of them.

Then let me encourage you to make the effort to find all of the others as well. To know the comfort of sins forgiven. The mercy of God. To know God's spirit dwelling within us.

And to know God's love in our deepest needs. Paul says then. Since these things are already yours. Make my joy complete.

[6 : 19] He acknowledges that he has joy for the Philippians. We've seen that over the last two weeks. But make my joy complete. He's not saying that the Philippians are bad. Or that they've missed out.

He's not saying any of that. But rather that they must press on. To be complete. We saw that same idea two weeks ago. That Paul writing about them said. God who's begun a good work in you.

Will bring it to completion. On the day of Christ. And the same idea of completion is here. Make my joy complete as well. He says make my joy complete.

And then goes on to say how they're to do that. Be of the same mind. Having the same love. Being in full accord. And of one mind. Four terms.

All stressing. Unity. Amongst those Christian people. Because unity is so essential for people who are Christians. Who belong together. In the fellowship of God's people.

[7 : 19] He's talking about inner attitudes. About goals and purposes. But he's not talking about uniformity. He's not talking about clones of each other.

Rather the concept is more like a symphony orchestra. That the Philippian Christians are each musicians or instruments within an orchestra. Playing to the same goal. The same purpose. In harmony. Yes there are differences in diversity. But not division. There is a common harmony going on. Within the instruments of God's people. Paul's argument you see for unity is like this. If as you have already received Christ's comfort. Then how can you be divided as Christ's people. If you've received God's love.

How can you not love the rest of God's people. If you share in God's spirit. Who is the source of unity. How can you be divided and not practice that unity. If you've received mercy.

[8 : 18] How can you not give and extend mercy to the rest of God's people. He's saying that if these four things in verse 1 are true as they are. Then unity must logically and necessarily follow.

You cannot be Christians practicing disunity. Given all the things that God has given to you. That's his argument. In view of all that God has done. And all that the Philippians have experienced of God's goodness and grace.

How can they not practice unity in their midst. It's not an optional extra you see. Christian unity is a gospel imperative. The church divided is at its own peril.

Ignoring and denying the gospel of God. Paul recognises that at least one essential character trait is needed.

If unity is to be practised. He goes on to say. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit. But in humility. Regard others as better than yourselves.

[9 : 23] Let each of you look not to your own interests. But to the interests of others. You may remember Charles Dickens novel. David Copperfield.

That rather awful character Uriah Heep. Walked around saying. I am a humble man. I'm not sure that he was very humble. Humility is a virtue that when we think we've got it. We've probably just lost it. Certainly in our society. Humility is not a virtue that many people seek. When we conduct marriage seminars here.

I have a session where I ask each of the couples or individuals in the session. What character trait do you think is most important to develop?

What sort of person do you want to be? Humility. And humility is almost never mentioned. And when it is mentioned it's by somebody who is a convinced Christian.

[10 : 24] Humility doesn't mean low self-esteem. It doesn't mean self-debasement or despising oneself. Paul's definition of humility here is very important for us to get right.

Humility means regarding others as better than yourselves. That doesn't mean regarding yourself so low that you cannot help but think of others as being better than yourself. But rather in a sense lifting others up so that you regard them as better or more important.

It doesn't mean that somebody like Steve Waugh should think that I'm a better batsman than he is. That would be folly as much as I'd like it to be true. But rather it's that we should think of others as being more important.

I used to work for National Mutual and to my shame they had an advertisement that you may well remember the slogan of. For the most important person in the world, you. Well it's wrong.

The most important person in the world is somebody else. That's humility. Recognising that others are more important than you. Regardless of your position or your gifts or your status or your qualities or virtues, regarding others as more important than yourself.

[11 : 39] And it's regarding others without qualification. It's talking about people who are Christians in the fellowship of God's people. But it's not saying regarding others who are good as more important than you.

It's regarding others with all their faults and flaws. All the irritations they have. Regarding others who annoy you no end as better than yourself. Regarding those whom you dislike, those whom you try and avoid.

Regard them as better than yourself. See it's a very tough demand isn't it? It's easy to regard others whom we love as better than ourselves. It's much harder to regard others whom we dislike as better than ourselves.

Paul's demand is unqualified. Regard others full stop as better than yourselves. That means then, as he says in verse 3, do nothing from selfish ambition.

Not that ambition per se is wrong. But it's the selfish ambition that's wrong. The ambition that is at the expense of others. Trying to tread over others. The ego that scores points of others.

[12 : 47] The ego that thinks that my success will necessarily mean somebody else's failure and that's what we strive after. The writer Gore Vidal said, somebody else's success is a death of part of me.

That's selfish ambition. That's what we're to put aside as Christian people. And also conceit, he mentions in verse 3. The word literally means empty glory.

That is, our boasting or pride in ourself that really has nothing to boast about or be proud about. To find a hollowness inside and yet covered up with pretense and pretentiousness.

Seeking the prestige and admiration of others when really there is nothing to actually praise in us. It's a tough demand to be humble.

That's why Paul spends so much time about it. That's why he so carefully phrases the way he exhorts the people to be humble. That's why he gives the basis for it in verse 1 so carefully and so tactfully.

[13 : 48] Trying to butter up the Philippians to accept the demand to be humble. That's why indeed the whole of this half of the chapter is urging Christians to be humble people.

Christians who've received mercy, comfort, forgiveness, the gift of God's Spirit are necessarily people who have exercised humility before God. There is no other way to approach God than to approach him with humility.

To come before God and say, God, this is what I'm going to offer you. Or this is what I contribute. God ignores that. That's not approaching God as a Christian. But Christians are those who

approach God with humility and say, as the hymn writer says, God, nothing in my hand I bring, but simply to thy cross I cling.

That's humility. Recognising that before God we are unworthy sinners, but nonetheless seeking his grace and mercy and forgiveness. Paul recognises that unity comes through humility, the absence of pride and self-conceit and ambition.

Where there's pride, it's like somebody blowing their own trumpet, playing their own tune, rather than being instruments in an orchestra, playing in harmony for the same goal.

[15 : 09] To show how important humility is, Paul goes on to give the most important example of all. And he does so at some length.

Have this mind, he says, let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. And then at some length he tells us the mind of Christ, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.

Taking the form of a slave being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

This is the greatest example of humility ever. That God himself, God's own son, Jesus Christ, should so humble himself to die upon a cross.

Says some important things about Jesus. We sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that at Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, Jesus was born, he began his life. But Jesus existed in heaven before the beginning of time.

[16 : 24] So the birth of the baby at Bethlehem 2,000 years ago is not the beginning of the life of Jesus. He already existed for millennia or however long eternity is before that birth in the manger.

The point is, you see, that Jesus, though God, though enjoying all the glory and majesty and splendour of God, the safety of heaven and so on, rather than seek to exploit that for his own gain and for his own benefit, put it aside.

Literally, we're told that he emptied himself. It's a strange expression. People have pondered for centuries. What does it mean that he emptied himself? What did he empty himself of?

Some radicals think that he gave up his divinity, that he's deity. He was no longer God. But that's certainly not true. Some suggest, as Charles Wesley writes in a hymn, that he emptied himself of all but love.

Another modern chorus says, he laid aside his majesty. As though they're the things that he gave up. Everything but love. Or he gave up his majesty. But in fact, the term emptied himself is an idiom.

[17 : 34] It literally means he gave up his rights. That's qualified by saying that he took the form of a slave in verse 7. A slave is somebody who has no rights.

Jesus wasn't forced or compelled to be a slave, but rather voluntarily gave up his rights as God himself was born a human. Indeed, took the form of a slave or servant.

He's still God. It's not saying that he's no longer God. Yes, he's God, but God manifests as a slave, as a human slave or servant. But that's not all.

Jesus' humility doesn't stop there. But it goes on. And being found in human form, Paul goes on to say, he humbled himself, became obedient to God the Father, and that obedience led him to death. Not just any old death, but the most humiliating and scornful death of all, a death on a cross. That's the example of humility.

[18 : 39] That's the example of humility par excellence. Jesus' death on a cross for us. Paul's not worried here about what Jesus' death accomplishes or why he died in the eternal scale of things.

The issue for Paul is humility. And Jesus, the Son of God, who'd existed from before all time in the glorious heavens, gave all of that up, renouncing all his rights as God in order to die on a cross.

For he considered our sins more important than himself. He sought others' interests rather than seeking to exploit his own divinity and glory.

For his own benefit. If that is not enough incentive for us to live humble lives, nothing is. If that doesn't stir us to be humble people, then nothing will.

But an example like that should change the way we relate to each other always. It should renounce and take away our pride always.

[19 : 49] that we always treat others as better and more important than ourselves. That we always look to others' interests rather than our own selfish desires and ambition and conceit.

Jesus' example should transform the way we live our lives and live out our relationships within Christian fellowship. And yet so often, sadly, we see churches divided, disunited, because of pride

and conceit and selfish ambition.

Because they've failed to follow the example of Jesus Christ. People who put up their own petty ideas and pursue them rather than the common good or the interests of other people. This is a great challenge to the Christian church.

A church that's been divided from the beginning for 2,000 years. The example of Jesus should change us and transform us radically in the inner core.

It's also a challenge to those who live private Christian lives. Indeed, there's no such thing, really, as a private Christian life. But for many people who treat their Christian life as something so private that they never share with anybody, that they're not involved in Christian fellowship, they come along and sit quietly on a pew and then disappear quickly and quietly.

[21 : 06] This is a challenge to you as well. Because Christians are called to share and be part of Christian fellowship. They're called to exercise and practice unity, which can't be done in the private living rooms of our lives.

This is a call to be involved with the people of God. to exercise humility with them and unity. It's an obligation on us all, not an optional extra, to practice humble unity with each other.

Paul, I think, gets carried away with his example of Christ because he finishes not by talking about Jesus' unity, but he acknowledges that Jesus didn't remain dead on a cross. But rather, as the outcome of that, God raised, highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus, the greatest example of humility, receives the highest place of all, the highest place in heaven, and the name which is above every name.

Not that the name Jesus itself is necessarily higher than any other name, but it seems to be saying that Jesus now is called Lord. There's a hidden quote in here from the Old Testament talking about every knee shall bow and every tongue confess, a place that speaks of the fact that God alone is God, but the word is Lord because the word Lord in the Old Testament is a word for God.

[22 : 43] It literally means Jehovah or Yahweh. Paul, a Jew, is making an astonishing claim here. He's saying that Jesus is God to be worshipped, and he looks forward to the day when every knee will bow before him and every tongue confess, but that's not looking forward to a day which will be like a great big giant church service with many hundreds and millions of people willingly and thankfully praising the name of Jesus Christ.

No, there's much more sharper cutting edge to this quote than that. For in Isaiah 45 where it's from, there's a recognition that on the day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that not all will do so willingly or thankfully at all, but rather there'll be those who are the enemies of God, those who've rejected God, those who've shunned his name or not known him.

They will be brought reluctantly before the throne of God and there reluctantly admit and confess that yes indeed Jesus Christ is Lord, that they'd failed to acknowledge that in their lives and now before the judgment throne of God, they're forced to admit it.

For most people in our society Jesus Christ is a swear word. On Easter Sunday afternoon I went to the football. I thought I was back in church because the name Jesus Christ was mentioned as often as he'd been mentioned in the morning service and every time it was mentioned I felt as though I should be saying is risen but I kept quiet.

For people like that who know his name is only a swear word, the day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is not a swear word but his Lord will be a day of some shame and horror for them.

[24 : 29] From the beginning of the Bible to the end there is a principle of God at work that God will exalt the humble and bring down the proud in their conceit.

It's there through the Psalms, the prophets, other parts of the Old Testament. It's there on the lips of Jesus in the words of Paul and Peter and James. It's there being demonstrated time and again throughout the Bible.

God exalting the humble but bringing down the proud in their conceit. And on the day when every knee shall bow and every tongue confess, that's what God will do.

That those who like Jesus Christ have exercised humility before God and each other, they will be exalted and raised up by God to his heaven. But those who've exercised lives of pride and conceit and selfish ambition will be brought down before the judgment seat of Christ.

There's a warning in this for us. Not to take lightly our confession of Jesus Christ as Lord but to follow the example of that Lord who lived a humble life to the full and then according to God's principle was exalted to the highest place.

[25 : 52] You see, the way to up is down and the way to down is up. The way to up, to glory, to exaltation is the way of humility and the way to down is the way of pride and conceit and selfish ambition.

The way to the crown is the cross to the throne is the tomb. The way to exaltation is humility. And if you're a person who's never come before God with humility asking God for forgiveness for his spirit, for the consolation of his love, for the encouragement of being in Christ, who've never come to him asking for his affection or sympathy, then do so now before it's too late so that at that final day when you confess that Jesus is Lord, you do so with a willing and thankful heart rather than a reluctant admission.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.