

Welcome with Joy

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service on Sunday the 4th of May 1997.

The preacher is Paul Barker. The sermon is entitled Welcoming a Welcome with Joy. Preaching from Philippians 2 verses 19 to 30.

You may like to have in front of you Philippians chapter 2 on page 954 in the Bibles.

We're continuing this sermon series through Paul's letter to the Philippians. After today we have a little rest for a few weeks until after Trinity Sunday. And we've come to the last part of chapter 2.

Let's pray. God, we pray that you will teach us now that our eyes and ears will be open to you. And that what we learn we may implement in our lives for the glory of Jesus Christ.

[1 : 02] For we ask it in his name. Amen. Many of you I know know what it's like to live far away from family and friends. Some of you have or have had parents in other countries or children in other countries or yourselves left home and travelled overseas to live.

Richard and Margaret, for example, have got children scattered around the world that they've just visited. The Lovegroves have all their family in Sydney. And we know that Louisa's grandmother died last week. And the pain of distance is quite acute.

Many of you would have experienced that in your lives as well. And many of you, therefore, will know what it's like to the treasure of receiving a letter or a phone call or even an occasional visit from somebody across the miles.

When I lived in England for three years before coming here, I always used to love collecting my mail and seeing in the top left corner of an envelope a little blue sticker with an airmail on it.

And a little Southern Cross, something from Australia, usually from a friend or family member. And then occasional phone calls were always very treasured. And then especially little visits from friends or family from time to time.

[2 : 18] Well, we know what it's like, many of us, the tyranny of distance to be so far away and to so much treasure that communication with people far away from us.

In the ancient world, that was even more acute. There were no telecom or rather Telstra special deals to ring internationally or STD for cheap rates in those days.

And there wasn't any daily post either. If you wanted to send a letter or a message to somebody, then you also had to send the messenger or find somebody who was going in that direction to pass on your greetings or your reports.

And so to get a message or to have a visit from somebody who lived a long way away. And remember, you didn't have to be far away in that ancient world in order to be very distant. That was something that was very treasured.

And part of that ought to be in our minds as we read this passage in Philippians. For Paul here is dealing with travel plans, with plans to communicate with the church at Philippi.

[3 : 18] Philippi is in North Greece. Paul is in prison probably in Rome. Distance is great. Not all that many people would make that distance and communicate regularly. And so that's the background.

And I want us to bear in mind just how important it is to keep in contact with people who are far away. As far as the letter to the Philippians goes, this is a very personal section.

In some sense, as we read it, we probably skip over it. We think, well, Paul's plans to go or St Timothy or Epaphroditus or whatever, well, that's all old hat. That doesn't really apply to us.

And yet, as I think we'll see, there are things in this passage that ought to speak to us as Christian people today. Paul firstly anticipates his own ability to travel to Philippi, though that's not going to be immediately.

The end of verse 4, he says, That doesn't mean in a few hours' time as though he's going to pop in for a cup of tea.

[4 : 18] It's a little bit far to do that. He's in prison, perhaps under some sort of house arrest, unable to travel perhaps even outside his house or certainly not very great distance at all.

And yet he says, I trust in the Lord. Literally, I have confidence in the Lord. Not in the Roman justice system that he'll get off his charge, which was a trumped-up charge anyway.

But rather, he trusts in the Lord because, as he said in the previous chapter, he knows that it will be for the Philippians' benefit that he is exonerated and acquitted of his charge and then is able to see the Philippians and to receive mutual encouragement with them.

So his confidence is in the Lord, in Jesus Christ, who is sovereign over all these things. For he knows that what will happen will be to the benefit of the Philippian Christians as well as to Paul himself.

So Paul hopes and trusts and has confidence that one day, soon he hopes, he'll be able to travel to Philippi. But in the meantime, he hopes to send Timothy. Verse 19, the beginning of today's passage, says, I hope, again, in the Lord Jesus, to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you.

[5 : 31] Timothy was one of Paul's converts in his early days in what's modern Turkey, southern Turkey at a place called Lystra, probably. Timothy, we know, travelled with Paul for much of his journey.

He was with Paul when Paul went to Philippi for the first time. Timothy also knows what it's like to be an envoy of Paul. When Paul and Timothy were at Athens, Timothy was sent up to Thessaloniki.

When Paul and Timothy were at Ephesus, Timothy was sent across the Aegean to Corinth. At least twice then, Timothy has been Paul's envoy to go to places where Paul has already ministered, to bring news of Paul, to encourage the Christians there, to receive news from them, maybe to teach them for a while, before perhaps returning to where Paul was.

He would therefore be the ideal person to send. He knows what it's like to be an envoy and he knows Paul well. Indeed, it seems he may well have been at times in prison with Paul in various places.

But there's more about Timothy that commends him for the task of being Paul's envoy to go to Philippi. All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.

[6 : 54] Timothy stands out because he will have a genuine concern for the welfare of the Christians who are in Philippi. All the others around about Paul and we don't know who they were or how many they were or where they'd come from, they, it seems, would not have such a genuine concern for the interests of the Philippian Christians.

You see, it's possible to be a Christian, even to be a keen Christian, and yet not to have a genuine concern for other people. It's possible to be warm in self-interest and cold in the interests of others.

Indeed, it's even worse than that because Paul describes those who wouldn't have a genuine concern for the Philippians as being people who do not have a concern for Jesus Christ.

All of them are seeking their own interests, not those interests of Jesus Christ. So to have a genuine concern for another Christian, other Christians plural, is to have at heart the interests of Jesus Christ.

And Timothy meets that standard, but those others around about Paul fail to meet such a standard. So Timothy is the best that Paul has to offer, and that's why he's so keen to send him.

[8 : 08] He's not sending someone second rate or somebody even dispensable, but he wants to send the best. But more than that, Timothy knows Paul well. Paul goes on to say in verse 22, In the ancient world, more often than today, a son would take the job of the father and would learn the job in the father's workplace, seeing him work in his young childhood days, and then as growing up, beginning to learn more and more specifically about the tasks of the father.

It's the sort of ancient apprentice at work. So if you can imagine one ancient person was a computer operator, and they'd learn how to operate their ancient computers by watching their father work, and then gradually the father would give some instructions, and they'd begin to take on the business for themselves.

It's very different from our world. Most of us men have not the same job as our father, I suspect. I certainly don't. My father doesn't understand my job at all, and I don't think I ever understood his either.

I never even saw him work, let alone virtually visit his place of work, for most fathers don't even work at home these days. And probably most of you are the same. You probably know something of what your father has done, and yet have never really seen and watched them work.

It's fairly rare for that to happen. In the ancient world that was more commonly the case. And Paul says that he has been, in a sense, the master and Timothy the apprentice. And Timothy has learned his ministry, has learned the gospel, has learned what it means to exercise gospel ministry from Paul.

[9 : 51] Not only from the explicit things that Paul would teach, saying this is how you do it and so on, but from watching as well. He'd seen Paul in prison and seen how he'd reacted. He's seen Paul in conflict and seen how he's been resolute and courageous, as well as maintaining godly Christian character, and so on and so forth.

Timothy has learned it from Paul. And therefore, he's met the apprenticeship, if you like. He's become a Christian minister. In fact, Paul says his worth is well known.

The word for worth suggests something that is tried and tested. Not somebody who's exercised Christian ministry when things are going well, but somebody who's exercised Christian ministry when things have been tough or under duress.

Somebody who's struggled against difficulty or opposition. That's Timothy, and his worth is tested and tried. So he meets the standard for being an envoy very well.

Paul can say, therefore, that Timothy is the best person, in effect, to go. His character is known. His ministry is known. And he has experience as an envoy, and he knows the Philippians.

[11 : 01] And yet, Paul goes on to say in verse 23, I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things are with me. At the moment, in the immediate future, Timothy is needed by Paul.

We don't know why. Maybe to do with Paul's legal case. If Paul were under house arrest, he may have needed somebody to run errands or be a communicator for him. We don't know.

It may have been that under house arrest, Paul needed somebody to earn some income for him. Maybe Timothy was doing that. We don't know. Maybe it was a pastoral situation or a particular difficulty that Timothy was needed for a short time.

We don't know. But as soon as that situation would pass, it seems, Paul was ready to send his right-hand man, Timothy, to the Philippians. So his travel plans.

Paul himself, that he would go, but he can't yet, because he's in prison. Timothy, but he can't yet go, because he's needed for some task. Thirdly, Epaphroditus, the man with a long name that's hard to pronounce.

[12 : 08] Epaphroditus had come from the Philippians. He was probably a Philippian himself. We know from the last chapter of the letter that he's brought with him a gift from the Philippians to Paul, a financial gift, not just for Paul's interests, probably, or his own needs, but also perhaps for the needs of the Christians in Rome, or maybe for others as well.

So Paul calls him in verse 25, your messenger sent to meet my needs, both financial and presumably pastoral and personal. So it's probable that Epaphroditus has come to Paul passed on the gift, but not just returned home, but stayed to meet Paul's needs, to minister to him or with him, to encourage him, to help him, to be encouraged by Paul as well.

We have no idea how long he's stayed with Paul, but it seems that he's stayed some time. Paul indeed speaks very highly of him. He calls him in verse 25, my brother, a term not just meaning my fellow Christian, but something a little bit more affectionate than that, somebody who is close to Paul and meets his needs.

He's also called a co-worker, sharing in the work, which may reflect the fact that Epaphroditus in Rome with Paul is working for the gospel with him there, or it may also refer to the fact that back in Philippi, Epaphroditus was a minister of the gospel in some sense, and so therefore shared in Christian ministry, if not in the same place, at least the same gospel.

But even more than being a brother and a co-worker, Epaphroditus is a fellow soldier. The army term suggests something of opposition or persecution, that being a minister of the gospel brings one into conflict with those who oppose Christian faith.

[13 : 51] Epaphroditus, being a fellow soldier, is one who has laboured, perhaps under persecution or opposition, perhaps under difficulty, against those who oppose the gospel. Whether that was in Philippi or in Rome or both, we don't know.

But nonetheless, he's clearly highly valued by St. Paul. He's no lame second best option then to send to the Philippians. It's not as though, oh, well, I can't send my best person, it doesn't matter who else, just send any old person.

Epaphroditus, like Timothy, fits the bill for being sent back to the Philippians. But there's more, perhaps, to the reason why I send Epaphroditus. Verse 26 says that he has been longing for you all.

Maybe that suggests some homesickness. Maybe not just homesickness. Maybe it's just his keen desire to know how his fellow Philippian Christians are going. Something that many of us would share when we've been long distances away from friends and family.

But more than that again, he has been longing for all of you and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Epaphroditus is distressed because the Philippians might be distressed.

[15:07] The word distress is a very strong word indeed. The only other place it's used in the New Testament is when Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane the night he was betrayed. And his distress when he's praying and drops of tears like blood are coming from him.

That's the sort of distress that Jesus had then. And the same word is used to apply here to Epaphroditus. It obviously is some keen distress. But not because he's been ill. His distress is because he's heard that the Philippians are distressed.

Epaphroditus, it seems, has taken ill, maybe en route to Paul. It's a dangerous route and maybe he'd been bashed up or robbed or something like that. Maybe he'd been injured walking on the road.

Or maybe he's just been ill. Now it seems that he's perhaps a bit better. Paul says in verse 30 that he came close to death for the work of Christ.

Maybe that suggests some deliberate persecution of him. But maybe it just means that he's risked his life travelling all the way from Philippi to Rome. And therefore he's come close to death for the work of Christ.

[16:14] Well, the Philippians knew somehow that Epaphroditus was ill. And Epaphroditus knew that the Philippians knew that he was ill. And Epaphroditus was worried because the Philippians were worried that Epaphroditus was ill.

I hope that's clear. That's not just a common cold. Paul says that he was very ill. Verse 27. So ill that he nearly died. Well, we don't know what it was but it was certainly something serious.

But God had mercy on him and not only on him but on me also so that I would not have one sorrow after another. Paul is thankful to God that Epaphroditus' life was spared so that he himself wouldn't be in grief along with the Philippians.

Though Paul says he's grateful to God that Epaphroditus' life has been spared and though he says that it's an act of God's mercy to spare his life I guess at the back of his mind there's also the recognition that death is gain.

If you remember back in chapter 1 that stunning expression of St. Paul to live is Christ and to die is gain. Paul knew that knew that if Epaphroditus had died it would have been gain for him and loss for Paul.

[17:32] But Paul recognises God's mercy in the fact that Epaphroditus has a ministry to fulfil both to Paul and then back to the Philippians and so he sees God's mercy in sparing his life.

Well, Paul then is anxious indeed urgent it seems to send Epaphroditus back to the Philippians so that Epaphroditus' mind is at rest that the Philippians know that he's better so the Philippians' minds are at rest because they see that Epaphroditus is with them and well so that their mind is also at rest because they know that Paul is okay in prison but also it seems that Epaphroditus would be the bearer of this letter that we've been reading and studying.

Remember that Paul wouldn't have walked down to a red pillar box and put it in a slot somebody would have had to take it with him and Epaphroditus it seems was the person. But what on earth have all those travel plans got to do with us?

It seems three points could be made that might apply to us. The first is the importance of Christian communication. Too often I think we take for granted meeting with Christian people and being encouraged by them.

In fact if too often we take it for granted too often we don't in fact do it when we meet together. It's very important for Christians to encourage each other to edify and build up each other to communicate with each other not only with those we meet week by week in church but those also that we no longer see friends or family who are Christians or ex-paritioners who've moved away from the area who are now perhaps isolated from their friends and family no longer receiving the Christian encouragement and edification they're used to.

[19 : 10] Not only does that apply to missionaries who are overseas or in outback South Australia but we ought to be people who are writing to them or ringing them up and communicating with them and praying for them and telling them we're praying for them and so on.

But also for those Christians who've moved to other places those who've gone into nursing homes and so on. We ought to take seriously our ongoing ministry to them to ring them up and encourage them but not just to say how are you, how's your health and so on but to encourage them in Christian faith to encourage them to keep on praying and reading their Bibles and to keep on with God worshipping him and trusting in him and relying on him for their needs.

And also of course we ought to be people who do that for each other not just talking about football and weather but building each other up in Christian faith. Paul's example is one for us to follow that it is worth communicating with each other for the sake of the Gospel.

So let's be people who do that. I encourage you to think about people who you've perhaps been tardy about ringing or writing or visiting. Let's make the effort to keep on with them for the sake of the Gospel to encourage them to keep on being Christians.

Sadly it seems so often people go on as Christians for many years but then perhaps run out of energy or encouragement and give up on their faith. Let's ensure that doesn't happen.

[20 : 34] Secondly, the chapter began if you remember back two weeks Paul's statement let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. That's still the theme running through this chapter.

Look not to your own interests but to the interests of others. In the middle of the chapter Paul is given Jesus as an example of that who though he was equal with God humbled himself and became obedient unto death for the sake of other people and their interests.

Timothy now is the example of that as well. He is the one who will have a genuine and sincere concern for the welfare of the Philippians.

That's what commends him to Paul to send him. But he's not just therefore commendable as an envoy but also as an example for the Philippians themselves to follow as one who has a genuine and sincere concern for the welfare of other Christians.

That's what also we should be like. Not people who have a concern for others that really masks our own self-concern. Very often it's easy to actually try and meet the needs of other people but yet in doing so really what motivates us is meeting our own needs to be needed and wanted.

[21 : 54] Timothy's concern for the welfare of the Philippians was genuine and sincere. It wasn't trying to boost his own needs or his own ego. It wasn't Timothy trying to seek the praise of others for doing a good job.

But rather it was him simply seeking to serve the needs of other people for their own sake and not for his own sake. The people who are sincere and genuine in meeting the needs of other people are usually those who are quite content to do so unnoticed rather than seeking to draw attention to their ministry.

Those who are private about their visiting or ministering to other people. Those who are not quick to complain if somebody ignores them or overlooks their own concern but rather always have other people's interests at the forefront of their lives.

That's Timothy and that was Jesus as well and that ought to be the model for us to follow. Possibly in elaborating why Timothy is so suited to be a minister for Paul, Paul is giving an indirect rebuke to the Philippians for their own selfishness.

So let's be like Timothy. Let's see other people's interests being served ahead of our own as Paul has exhorted in this chapter. But finally it seems that Paul's theme that has been also running through from chapter 1 is about living a life worthy of the gospel.

[23 : 23] And Epaphroditus along with Timothy but perhaps clearly Epaphroditus is an example of that as well. He was prepared to risk his life for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Whether that's through travelling through difficult situations risking his life on a road where there might be robbers or the chance of injury or illness was great we're not sure.

The word that says at the end of the chapter risking his life suggests gambling his life. And though all of us I suspect would want to shun away from gambling and are perhaps a bit horrified about where the casino and the emphasis on gambling in this state is headed as Christians we can gamble with our life knowing that if we die for the sake of the gospel that we indeed gain.

And if we remain alive for the sake of the gospel we're with Christ so we in effect can't lose anything. By gambling with our lives for the sake of the gospel. For Paul has said in the chapter 1 to live is Christ and to die is gain.

That's a challenge to many of us I suspect who are quite concerned to protect our own safety security health and whatever. There are many people who would be eminently suited to be missionaries in outback Australia or overseas but who because they are keen to secure their own health or safety are unwilling to travel and do those sorts of things.

[24 : 52] Why risk my life in another country? For the sake of the gospel that's why. And maybe the example of Epaphroditus ought to challenge some of us as well to be people who are prepared to put our lives at risk for the sake of the gospel of Jesus Christ for it's worth it in the end.

But the same is true for just taking a stand in this world for being Christians who are prepared to stand up and be counted so that Christ's voice may be heard in a world that is ignorant of it to make a stand that may be unpopular that may face rejection of our friends or family in a world that doesn't know Jesus Christ.

To live a life worthy of the gospel takes courage it takes daring but remember that we've got nothing to lose for whatever we lose in physical terms we gain a hundredfold in Christ's terms.

So this travel plan of Paul about Timothy and Epaphroditus has in part a hidden agenda as well. It's not just about who he's going to send to the Philippians it's about being like Timothy the one who puts the other's interests first in a genuine and sincere way and being like Epaphroditus who's prepared to risk his life for the sake of the gospel.

Such people Paul says in verse 29 we ought to honour the implication also is that such people we ought to be. Let's pray.

[26 : 32] Father we pray that you may change us that we may be people who seek not our own interests but the interests of others and the interests of the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray that you will change us that we may be people who don't seek to protect and ensure our own lives and safety and security and health but rather are willing to risk all for the sake of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who gave up his all in death on the cross to bring us salvation.

salvation. We ask this in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Thank you.