

Good morning everyone. Welcome. It is great to be here today.

As I begin I will pray.

Lord I thank you for your presence with us this morning

For your love for us, the peace and the understanding that you bring.

Lord open our hearts and minds this morning.

Lift the veil from our minds

So that we might hear the still small voice of your Spirit.

Amen.

Our reading this morning is from Philippians chapter 2, verses 1 to 11.

Therefore if in any way there is encouragement in Christ, if in any way consolation from love, if in any way you have fellowship created by the Spirit, if in any way you have experienced the tenderness and compassion of God in Christ, then make my joy complete. Think alike. Love alike. Be of one soul. Be of one mind. Do not act out of a spirit of rivalry, nor out of empty conceit. Act rather with humility and consider others better than yourselves. Each of you must look to the interests of others rather than the interests of yourselves. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

*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.*

*Therefore God also 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.*

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church

If you grew up in a Baptist church in the 1970's or earlier you would have come across this - the green Baptist hymn book. As a boy I used to think it was ancient, but when I looked at it this week I saw it was first published in 1962, so it isn't really that old. Although each of the hymns does include the writer and when they lived, with some hymns going back to the 12 century and that is old. So this is the Baptist equivalent of "Hymns Ancient and Modern".

Why do I mention this? Well the second half of today's reading is one of the oldest Christian hymns that there is. We don't have the music so we don't know what it sounded like, but we do know it is a hymn. And what happens, even today is that we might be doing something or saying something, and then a Christian song comes to mind. That is what happened to Paul. That is what is there in this passage.

Now when that happen to me, usually there is both something significant in what I was thinking about and also something significant in the song or the hymn. And that is the case here as well.

So we will back things up slightly to start with and look at what Paul was talking about at the start of the chapter.

There definitely was something going on that really moved Paul passionately.

At the beginning of the passage there is a repeating phrase "if in any way".

Now that does not mean if you fully understand, if you are the best in the word at something, no it means if you have had a glimpse of this, if you have at some time or another experienced just a bit of this. So Paul using language like that is intriguing.

And then there are the things that Paul talks about, with the "if in any way" phrases. And they are things that we know that we have experienced. They are things that are close by to each of us.

Encouragement,

Consolation from love,

Fellowship from the Spirit of God

Tenderness, compassion.

We have all experienced these things, the people at Philippi had all experienced these things as well. The "if in any way's" that are in the passage are pointers to us and to our experience.

They are at the heart of what it is like to be a followers of Jesus. What we experience because of Jesus love for us.

And they are there because Paul is working up to something big, something that he was pleading to the people of Philippi about.

He wanted them to think alike, to love alike, to be of one soul, to be of one mind.

Working together, loving each other. No more rivalry and selfish ambition but instead putting each other first.

That was what Paul wanted to happen.

Now I have to say, that at Flaxmere Baptist Church at the moment I am not aware of any issues like this. So don't think that I am talking about this because there is something going on that you don't know about.

I am talking about this because it is the next bit in the book that we are working our way through. This is the passage that we are up to.

But I am also aware that Baptists and schisms, divisions, do go together. Baptists from the very start were dissenters, people who did not conform or go along with what was happening in the state churches. They wanted to do their own thing.

So divisions are part of the worldwide history of Baptist churches.

For example the very first Baptist church in New Zealand was in Nelson and started in 1851. Twenty six years later when the first minister reflected on a church congregation that was round about the same size it had been at the beginning , he said "if it wasn't for strife and division we would have been five fold what we are."

It is unfortunate, but divisions are part of our history and many of us might still be carrying wounds from divisions that we have experienced.

But it is not just us who have experienced it in our history, the church in Philippi had issues as well.

Now you might say, well what are those issues that divide. Let's get them sorted out, lets understand what the Bible says about them and then we will be fine. But it is not as simple as that.

A little while back Jo and I watched a delightful movie called Up.

I will show you a short clip from the movie.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrAIGLkSMIs>

That is the start of a joke that goes through the rest of the movie. Whenever Dug think that there is a squirrel - it is "squirrel". It is so funny. What Dug had been doing is no longer important, because there might be a squirrel somewhere.

Now in that movie they never show a squirrel, it is just the thought of them that distracts Dug.

Now when I think of most of the divisions I have seen in churches - they have been about squirrel things. They have seemed very important at the time. But years later it is a case of wondering what on earth they were really about. They were not about things like is Jesus really the son of God or did he really rise from the dead. Instead at their centre were personalities that clashed. Yes their might have been differences of understanding - but those could have been worked through if everyone had followed what Paul talks about in this passage.

And the divisions were about things that were like squirrels - distractions.

I won't tell you about what those moments were and what the distractions were since it would be like setting a whole scurry of squirrels loose this morning and in our own way we all have a little bit of Dug in us.

And I find it interesting that we don't know what the issues were in Philippi either. Paul does not mention the details, he does not take sides.

Instead he focuses on attitudes and on Jesus.

The attitudes for us to have are

Thinking alike, loving alike, being of one soul, being of one mind.

Acting in humility towards each other.

Now that does not mean we are to be absolutely identical. Being of the same mind does not mean having an identical mind. It does not mean having the same favourite colours, liking the same food, watching the same TV programmes, reading the same books and agreeing totally about everything.

God did not make us to be clones.

But it does mean thinking alike and loving alike.

Have you ever had a discussion with someone and you have found that those core values that you hold are the same?

Then when you have different perspectives and see things from different angles, it is not a problem since it all adds together, it just means that there is a bigger picture that everyone sees now, there is a bigger understanding that everybody gets.

In contrast when you are trying to work with someone and their core values are really different to yours, then it can be really really difficult.

Most of the time when I was at Kinleith I had engineers as bosses and we looked at things as engineers and that worked well. For a while though I had an accountant as a boss who was focussed on himself and his career. We just saw things totally differently, these days my approach would be different to what it was then, but at that time I really struggled. I found it really tough and I think my boss found me really hard to work with as well.

But as followers of Jesus, we have Jesus core values, we follow Jesus. We follow the way of Jesus.

Even though we all come from different backgrounds and heritages and cultures.

We are one.

We can be of one mind. Having those same core values.

And that means considering others, asking and valuing their perspectives rather than just focussing on ourselves and looking at things through our eyes. Now it is not easy. It is not the way that things normally happen. Most of us would have experiences of people who have come saying that they are here to help us but we then discover that they were more concerned about themselves than they were about us.

That is the way of the world, but that is not the way of God.

And that is why Paul got caught up in that ancient hymn.

We are to have the same mind as one another, because we are followers of Jesus and we are to have the same mind, the same attitudes as Christ Jesus.

Look at what Jesus did...

He was there in heaven, equal to God the Father, he was in the form, the substance the character of God

And he gave that up.

In contrast that first sin in the bible was Adam and Eve wanting to become like God.

The two big searches in the ancient world were around wealth

- alchemy, trying to make gold so you could be as rich as God. Or finding El

Dorado the city of gold

or the search around life

- Finding the elixir of life, finding the fountain of youth

Those searches were about upwards mobility, trying to be like God.

Desiring to be like God, not considering others but seeing ourselves as better than them is the source of conflict in the world. It was in the past, it is today. That is the source of war, greed, envy and exploitation it is there at the heart of it all.

But look at Jesus. He was in heaven, equal to God the Father. He had it all and Jesus emptied himself.

Jesus actively chose downward mobility.

Jesus emptied himself.

Taking the form the body of a slave, Jesus become human. He limiting himself to what humans can do. Jesus humbled himself, he was obedient to the point of death, death on the cross

That is what Jesus did. That is why God raised him up.

Jesus is our example.

Now we don't have to sacrifice ourselves like Jesus did.

But the attitude that Jesus had, considering others, that is the example for us.

So when Paul says

Think alike. Love alike. Be of one soul. Be of one mind.

He is saying forget the squirrels. Focus on Jesus and the example that Jesus is for us.

In the ways that we interact with one another - Don't do things out of a spirit of rivalry, don't think of ourselves as being better than others. Consider other people, value them highly. Treat them with admiration. Look after them, bless them.

Listen to them. Cherish one another. I want to challenge us all to think about how we can do that by our words and our actions. Pause for a moment, listen to what God is saying to us.

Since when we do that, when we live like that, when we show the love of God to each other, God will be glorified. Now we will still have times when we have differences of opinion. That will happen.

There will still be things that we need to work through together. That will happen. But Paul knew that if the people at Philippi did this, and behaved like this then his joy would be made complete. His heart would dance with joy. Since this would show Jesus and his selfless, downwardly mobile character at work in their lives.

And I know that if we all do this, our joy will be made complete as well. Our hearts will dance with joy. Since this would show Jesus and his selfless, downwardly mobile character at work in our lives.

Let us Pray