

“ORDINARY PEOPLE”
Philippians 4:1-9

A couple of weeks ago we looked at some of the things Paul said, almost in passing, about the Holy Spirit and his work in us. Last week we looked at the story of one of the early churches which we pieced together from two or three short passages in various books of the New Testament. This morning we're going to look at some more lessons to be learned from things that are not central to the main story and teaching of the New Testament, but are still helpful for us today. Remember that Paul told Timothy that *“all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness”* (2 Timothy 3:16).

So, as I say, we're going to look at three characters from the life of the early church, three people who were part of the congregation that met at Philippi. More often than not we look at the characters in the Bible whom we consider to be the “heroes” of the faith, people whom we maybe think lived their lives on a different plane from us, people who are somehow special – people like David, who killed Goliath and became such a great king: Isaiah, who was a tremendous preacher: Peter, the man who got the Church going after Jesus had returned to heaven: Paul, the fearless evangelist, who spoke to crowds of ordinary people as well as to the leaders of the Roman Empire.

Those people, though, (as we've said before) all had their faults and shortcomings. They were human, just like the rest of us, and the Bible doesn't gloss over their faults and shortcomings. But apart from them, the well-known and famous characters who seem to dominate the story of God's dealings with his world, we are given little glimpses of others, about whom we know very little, but from whom we can still learn something about the way in which we are to follow Jesus. The Old Testament is full of the names of those who are mentioned only once and about whom we know nothing. In the New Testament we read of all the people who came to Jesus at different times, the people whom the apostles met and, at the end of most of Paul's letters, there are greetings to lots of individuals whom he had met on his travels.

In the short passage we read this morning, we came across Clement and two women called Euodia and Syntyche. We really know nothing about Clement other than that he was one of Paul's *“fellow-workers”*, but we are allowed just a peep into the lives of the two women, something that can still connect with us today. These were ordinary people, ordinary members of the church in Philippi – people just like you.

These two women were obviously members of the church in Philippi, but they weren't behaving terribly well when Paul wrote to them. Maybe someone from the church there had been in touch with Paul about what was going on and, as he gets to the end of this letter, he feels he needs to say something directly to them. And it's interesting that what he has to say really sums up the themes of the whole of his letter, which is about the joy of knowing Jesus and being involved in his work.

1. THEY WORKED TO SPREAD THE GOSPEL

Paul says that these two women, Euodia and Syntyche, have worked hard alongside him to spread the good news about Jesus. (Whatever else we might have been told about Paul and women, he certainly ensures that they have a major part to play in the task of evangelism and teaching.) In the first chapter of this letter, Paul tells the Christians of Philippi that they ought to be telling as many other people as possible about the new life that Jesus can bring. It was hard work for them and it's still hard work for us today, but it is nevertheless something that we must do if the church is to continue and the Kingdom of God is to be extended. In fact, it is at the core of our calling as Christians.

Euodia and Syntyche had helped Paul in this – they had *“contended at his side”* in the cause of the gospel. Maybe they had been spreading the word amongst their friends and neighbours. It's probably unlikely that they would have had opportunities to preach as Paul did, simply because of the cultural

climate in which they lived, but we get the impression that they made the most of every opportunity to share their faith, because that's what being a Christian is all about.

And we too, we ordinary people, have the same task of telling other people about Jesus. Some of us will have the gifts and the confidence to stand up and address groups of people. Some of us will have the ability to talk to strangers – those who knock on doors or get involved talking to folk in the Market Square after our open-air events, for example. But all of us should be able to tell our friends and neighbours quite naturally about the ways in which Jesus is at work changing our lives.

2. THEY ARGUED BUT PAUL WANTED UNITY

These two women weren't heroines who did nothing wrong, however. It's obvious from what Paul says that they had fallen out. We don't know the reason for their disagreement, nor how long it had been going on, nor how they were conducting their little war of words, but Paul knew that a divided church is a weak church and that Christian who behave like this do no service at all to the cause of the gospel. There's no point talking to other people about the love of God if we are not showing it in our own lives. From the things he says in several of his letters, Paul was obviously very much aware of the things that were going to cause trouble in churches. He warns people in more than one of his letters about being gossips, meddlers and busybodies. In fact, there are far more warnings against this kind of thing – gossiping, tittle-tattle, malicious rumours and so on – in Paul's letters than anything about, for example, homosexuality. Yet we rarely see the same kind of judgement and sanction applied to the nosy, gossipy busybodies who have been a feature of the life of the Church since Paul's time as we see levelled at those who might be considered sinners in other ways.

Now, I'm sure we'll never find a church where everyone agrees with everyone else about everything. There will always be those who have different attitudes and opinions from us, and we have to come to terms with that. One of the first things we have to do is to listen to other people's points of view and try to understand why they think and behave as they do. Then we can start to work towards agreement. (And that doesn't mean that you expect everyone to listen just to what you think – have a go at listening to someone else for a change!) Paul asks a third person to step in and bring about some sort of reconciliation between these two bickering Christians, someone who may be an anonymous "*loyal yokefellow*" or may be someone called Syzrus – the Greek isn't too clear. We assume that Paul is writing this letter at some distance from the situation, rather than that he's too scared to cross swords with the protagonists. Whatever the situation, he is careful not to take sides in the argument. It is, he says in v5, important to "*let your gentleness be evident to all.*" Disputes have no place in the life of the church and need to be resolved as soon as possible.

3. THEY REJOICED THAT THEY BELONGED TO GOD

Paul tells the people of Philippi to rejoice in the Lord always (v4). Their lives were to show real joy. I wonder to what extent Euodia and Syntyche showed that joy in their lives. But it's not to be confused with that kind of bubbly happiness that is just being jolly for the sake of it. We all have things in our lives that we find difficult to cope with and which make life very tough for us at times. Paul isn't saying that Christians will never have any problems – if you read his letters you'll see just how much he had to put up with in terms of physical, emotional and spiritual hardship – but he is telling us what to do when the problems arise.

If we have a foundation of joy in our lives, a realisation that God really is in control, then we can bring our requests to God to help us through. If we get into the habit of asking for God's help when things are hard, then he will give us strength to deal with our anxieties and allow us to experience his peace, which surpasses anyone's attempts to explain it (v7). No doubt these two women had experienced that peace,

but while they were at each other's throats, they would find life was much more difficult. They would be missing out on that joy, that serenity, that really does characterise the people of God.

So they weren't spiritual giants, great heroines of the faith. These were two ordinary women, two ordinary Christians, like all of us here, who had been touched by Jesus and affected by his Holy Spirit, and they wanted to tell others how good it was, even though at times that was hard work. They had their disagreements, but Paul was anxious to ensure that they got sorted out, even if it required someone else to get in and act as umpire. Paul reminds them and us that they could experience peace once again if they really got to grips with God's purposes for them.

In some ways that goes back to what we were saying last week – a call to return to our first love of Jesus. Whilst there are disagreements, whilst there are gossips and busybodies doing things that cause us to take our eyes off Jesus and concentrate on our own petty concerns, we will never make any progress and we will never be the people he wants us to be. We have been privileged to be given the peace of God and a sense of joy in our Lord. Ordinary people, maybe, but ordinary people with an extraordinary God. May that be evident to all as we seek to live for him.

(Discussion notes on next page)

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Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think "*the cause of the gospel*" is such hard work?
2. Why do you think there are so often disagreements in church life?
3. Paul warns the readers of his letters against being gossips, meddlers and busybodies. In what ways can such things spoil the life of the church? Why do you think we are less harsh on these sins than on many other sins?
4. How can we "*let our gentleness be evident to all*"?
5. Paul is very clear in this letter that Christians should be joyful. Why do you think that is?
6. Has anything you have read in these verses caused you to want to change anything in your life?