

**“IN IT TOGETHER”**  
***Philippians 1:1-11***

I love Paul’s *Letter to the Philippians*. It’s a letter that is full of joy. It’s uplifting and encouraging and inspiring. It’s one Christian sharing with others the real satisfaction of living and working for Jesus Christ. And my mind is always drawn to the words we just read, words from the very opening of this letter, whenever I think about the relationship which we have with other Christians who may be working in different contexts and out of different traditions. Those of you who are regulars here will probably realise that I refer to this passage quite often, but it’s particularly appropriate to look at it this morning as we focus on the work which Tim and Helen are doing in a very different situation in another part of Europe.

If you know anything about Paul’s letters, you’ll be aware that he begins pretty well every one with a section of thanks and praise, both to God for the shared faith that lies behind his links with the people to whom he is writing, and to the Christians themselves for the ways in which they are sharing in the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus and the support that they have been to Paul himself, both practically and in prayer. And here at the beginning of this letter, Paul puts prayer very much at the heart of what he wants to say. Very briefly this morning I want us to latch on to some of the key ideas in this passage and see how they can be made real in our situation here in another provincial English city hundreds of years and miles from the original recipients, as we recognise the links we have with Christians serving God in other places – particularly this morning in Kosovo.

**1. PRAYER**

What often amazes me about Paul’s relationship with the churches he had planted or over which he had some responsibility is that he is always praying for them – and clearly assumes they are praying for him, too. But it’s the thing that really unites us as followers of Christ. Whatever the geographical or theological distance between us we should be praying for each other – and beginning that prayer, as Paul does, with thanksgiving – “*I thank my God every time I remember you.*” Paul is just so grateful that there are other people who are sharing with him in the benefits of Christ’s mission and also sharing with him in the task of making those benefits known in the world.

And not only is he thankful – he’s actually joyful about it. It is a real pleasure to pray for them and the things that he knows about them are a source of rejoicing to him. This letter is all about joy, about rejoicing in God and making the most of life – Paul is one of those faintly annoying people who is able to rejoice whatever’s going on in his life, so he’s bound to write about that. But the questions we must ask ourselves are about how often we pray for each other – within and between churches – and how thankful,

how joyful we are that there are other Christians around who are engaged in the same mission that we are, the mission of demonstrating the Kingdom of God through our words and actions. We've heard from Tim and Helen this morning something about what God is doing in their neck of the woods and I hope we find that encouraging and stimulating. We can see our prayers are being answered and see that God is using his servants in a way that is really making a difference.

## 2. PARTNERSHIP

The reason for this gratitude and this joy is that Paul sees what they are doing as being involved in a partnership. They are working together in this project, the "*partnership in the gospel*". Now, a partnership – be it a business partnership or a personal partnership or a marriage, for example – means that the people involved in it are all working towards the same goals, but aren't necessarily identical, they're not clones of each other and, particularly in business, are not doing it in the same way. Paul and the Christians in Philippi were all working towards the same goal of making Jesus Christ known, but Paul was doing that as an itinerant evangelist, the Philippians were doing mainly within the community in which they lived. Paul was a preacher, the Philippians were conversationalists, counsellors, activists, carers and so on.

We can be grateful for other Christians who are working in very different ways around the world, with BMS World Mission in Brazil and France and Kosovo and North Korea and Central Africa, and many other places – as well as with other agencies and mission partners (Mission Romania, Andrew Potter in Benin, the Khimasias with foreign students in our universities) and can see that we are all engaged in this same task. But the joy is that, although we are partners, we are working in different ways, influencing different networks, bringing different gifts, abilities, resources, perspectives to that same task. And what happens here locally can also mirror that with all kinds of mission going on in and through the Christian community of Lichfield.

Part of the reason for that joy and gratitude is that, although the mission of the followers of Jesus still appears to be far from completed, God has assured us that it will be. As we work together in this seemingly endless task to which we've been called, we know that it will be worth it in the end – even if we don't always get to see the results of our labours. Paul tells the Philippians that he is confident that "*he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Jesus Christ*". Friends, it's worth it! Keep working at it – keep working **together** in partnership at it – and we will eventually be able to enjoy the fruit of that effort and energy.

### 3. PURITY

Paul is, indeed, thankful for all that they are able to do together and for the ways in which God is at work in their mission. But the real business of his prayer for the Philippians is in the last couple of sentences of this passage. He is praying for their development as followers of Jesus Christ. He prays that they will have a greater love for each other and for God and that this love will lead on to a “*deeper knowledge and depth of insight*” of God and his ways. He wants them to get deeper into God, not just intellectually, academically – that way lie the seemingly divergent philosophies of the Gnostics and the Pharisees. He wants them to know God in the sense of experiencing him, knowing God’s activity in their lives, feeling him at work within in them – something that will happen as they open themselves more and more to the work of the Holy Spirit.

And that knowledge of God is not just so that they can have the satisfaction of appearing to be somehow superior to other people, other Christians even. That was the problem Paul encountered with the church at Corinth. There is a more powerful, less self-centred reason for that – so that they might live more holy lives. He prays for their discernment and their purity. And, from what we read of Paul elsewhere, this isn’t a patronising, smug attempt to suggest that he is somehow better than them. He really is concerned that they should live lives that stand out. He wants the Christian community to be a beacon of light in an otherwise very murky culture. And then, he prays, they will be “*filled with the fruit of righteousness.*”

We pray for each other here pretty regularly, I imagine. And we pray for those engaged in mission around the world. But usually our prayers are for crises to be overcome – for healing, for strength to face difficult situations, for help in times of stress: all those things that are listed at the end of prayer letters from our mission partners. I wonder how often we pray for each other’s spiritual and moral development. Do we pray for our church – and for the worshipping and witnessing communities that we support around the world – that they might be places of holiness, full of people whose lives are having an impact on the community around? Imagine the effect it might have if we prayed for those engaged in mission in these places to be abounding in their knowledge of God and “*filled with the fruit of righteousness*”, so that they would just in themselves be beacons of light in those places. So that another of my favourite mission texts might be fulfilled – *Zechariah 8:23*.

And notice that Paul closes this little section by stressing that this should all be for “*the glory and praise of God*”. If we really did start to pray thanking God for our fellow disciples – especially those who have followed God’s call to serve him in different and often difficult cultures – and asking for his help to live lives of true integrity ourselves, it would be wonderful if others, seeing the lives of the disciples of Jesus Christ, were able to say not what great people they must be, but what a great God they must serve. Let’s keep praying for Tim and Helen and all that they are seeking to do for God where he has called them.