7:00p.m. Service October 30th 2011 Philippians 1

It is a pleasure to be preaching on this very happy occasion as we gather to celebrate Amberôs baptism and to celebrate Holy Communion together. Today is All Saints Sunday, a day when Christians traditionally celebrate past heroes of the faith. So it is good this evening to be considering one of the greatest figures in Christian history, St. Paul and to be introducing one of his loveliest pieces of writing, the letter to the Philippians, which weôll be looking at over the course of the coming few weeks.

In approaching this sermon I thought about preaching exegetically verse by verseé but with 30 verses that would be lengthy. Alternatively, I thought of just choosing two or three verses from the chapter. But, instead, since this is the first of a series of four sermons, what Iôm suggesting we do is to look at the context of this letter - who Paul was writing to, why he was writing, his relationship with his readers - and then explore one main theme from this first chapter of the letter.

To start with then, something about Philippi and the letter to the Philippians. And at the outset it is good to realise that ancient Philippi wasnôt just any common or garden town, it was a special city. Why? because it was a Roman colony. Romans who had found themselves on the losing side of the battle between Emperor Octavian and Anthony and Cleopatra had settled in Philippi. As a Roman colony it enjoyed exemption from certain local taxes and had its own laws. Just as the American embassy in Belgium is a little piece of American territory, so, Philippi, though it was in Greece was a little piece of Italy. So it enjoyed more than usual civic pride.

Whatôs more the ancient city of Philippi was and is a particularly special city for European Christians. Why? Because it was through Philippi that the gospel first came to Europe. The story is told in the Book of Acts chapter 16 and itôs worth recalling. You remember that Paul, on a missionary journey in Asia Minor, had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and pleading with him: ñCome over to Macedonia and help us.ò So it was that Paul and Luke and others sailed along the northern coast of the Mediterranean from what is now Turkey, into Greece where they landed at the city of Philippi in Eastern Macedonia. Philippi was the port of entry for Christianity in Europe.

Interestingly, it seems the first European converts were women. One of the first things Paul does when he arrives in Philippi is to find a local Jewish prayer group. He goes to the riverside outside the city gate and meets a group of women who had gathered for prayer. One of these women was a dealer in purple cloth, called Lydia. Lydia responded to Paulôs message and was baptized, Whereasa we baptized Amber in a font in church, in those days it was more usual to baptize outside in running water. After she was baptized Lydia offered Paul hospitality at her home, and its seems in fact that the first gatherings of Christians in Philippi were at Lydiaôs place ï she operated the first European house church. This isnôt surprising because although the prevailing culture was patriarchal, women in Macedonia had unusually high status and often held the kinds of roles that in other parts of the Roman empire were reserved to men.

Now all this background from the book of Acts, helps us to make sense of some of the opening verses of Paulôs letter to the Philippians. He evidently has a very close, affectionate relationship with these people. He himself founded this church. He baptized its first members. So he says, in chapter 1 verse 3: ñI thank my God every time I remember you.ò And verse 7 ñIt is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart.ò Of course what unites Paul with the Philippians above all is their shared faith. Verse 7: ñAll of you share in Godôs grace with me.ò But there was also a close personal relationship. At least at this stage of his life, Paul wasnôt married, he had no natural children, and the Christians in Philippi were his spiritual family. So, verse 8, he says: ñhow I long for all of you with the affection of Jesus Christ.ò

Now what generates this sense of *longing* is of course the reality of separation. Maybe Paul is writing this letter from Ephesus, more likely from Rome several weeks journey away. And itôs not just a question of distance. Paul is in prison: he is physically prevented from seeing them: verse 13: ñI am in chains for Christ.ò

So Paul is in prison in a foreign country, writing this letter to his spiritual family. Writing the letter, holding them in his prayers, is as close as he can get to his spiritual family. Now there are other Christians in the place from which he is writing. But these folk arenôt particularly nice to him. In verse 15 he says: ñsome preach Christ out of envy and rivalryò. We get the impression that there are rival Christian preachers who are quite happy to see Paul out of the way. So not only does Paul have to contend with hostile authorities, he has to contend with some hostile Christians. As the politician once prayed: ñLord if you can only save me from my friends, Iôll have no difficulty taking care of my enemies.ò

Beyond all this, Paul does not know whether he will be released or whether he will be executed. Verse 20: ñI eagerly expect and hope that I will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body whether by life or by death.ò As Paul contemplates his future he doesnôt know whether that future will hold freedom ï the possibility to continue his ministry and maybe to see his beloved Philippians again ï or whether it will entail the martyrôs crown.

So, humanly speaking the situation is about as hard and as stressful as it could be. Paul is physically constrained with irons on his arms and legs. Those who should be his friends are benefitting from his misfortune. He is contemplating loved ones in a far off foreign city whom he misses very much ï whilst his own future is suspended somewhere between life and death. I would be very surprised indeed if any of us here this evening face stresses on this level.

And yet, and this is the extraordinary thing about this letter, Paulôs dominant emotion is joy. The verb rejoice and the noun joy occur 16 times in the four chapters. So verse 18: ñAnd because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.ò Eugene Peterson in his introduction to Philippians in the Message Bible writes: ñThis is Paulôs happiest letter. And the happiness is infectious. Before weôve read a dozen lines, we begin to feel the joy ourselves ï the dance of words and the exclamation of delight have a way of getting inside us.ò Pettersonôs experience of this text as a translator is that it transmits an infectious joy.

Now you might say that Paul was an exceptional person ï after all, we call him Saint Paul, someone quite removed from our experience of life. You might even say that manifesting this kind of resilient joy in the face of suffering is unnatural: normal human beings should be permitted to collapse in self-pitying despair when life gets this tough. But I have to say that in the teaching of Jesusé this kind of joy is ónormalô. It is what God wills for us. In Jesus parable of the vine in John chapter 15 he says: ñI have told you this so that my joy may be I you and that your joy may be complete.ò Or again, in the incredibly important John chapter 17 ï the only recorded full length prayer of Jesus ï in verse 13: ñI say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them.ò The conferral of joy on his disciples is a key part of Jesus last will and testament.

Donôt get me wrong. What Jesus is talking about, what Paul demonstrates in his life is not a superficial pretending things are going well when they arenôt. That kind of attitude is beautifully parodied in the life of Brian when as the central character dies the entire cast joins in singing ñalways look on the bright side of lifeò. Nor is it the attitude of the ancient Stoics who so scorned physical pain that they could speculate as to whether a man might still be happy even when he was being stretched on the rack. Christian joy isnôt an ironic attitude to suffering nor an indifferent attitude to suffering. No, the joy that Jesus wills and prays for arises from faith. It comes from the deep certainty that our lives, our relationships with our loved ones, our futures are in the hands and the care of God. It takes suffering completely seriously but triumphs over it. It is the confidence that Paul embodies when he says in verse 21 of tonightôs chapter: ñfor me to live is Christ, to die is gainò.

Joy is a hallmark of the Christian life. It is a fruit of the Spirit ï the second fruit, in fact, after love. It is a very desirable quality. It is infectious. It is healing, and it is good. By contrast, it is notable, that North West European societies have done a pretty good job in keeping joy to a minimum. Itôs easy to think that is normal, but you only have to visit a developing country to see that it isnôt. And here we Christians have the opportunity to be counter-cultural. We donôt have to be miserable. We donôt have to settle for a routine of grumbling and complaining. With St. Paul we can have hearts that are full of joy - even when times are tough.

Part of my job, part of every ordained ministerôs job, is to take funerals. There are lots of things about Belgium that I love: the excellent medical care, the café culture, the foodé but, as a professional, one thing that Iôm less keen on are the funerals. Belgian funerals can be miserable occasions. Nobody sings. Everything is black. The mood is heavy. Funerals at crematoria can be especially bleak.

By contrast this last Monday I officiated at a remarkable funeral here at Holy Trinity. The widow of the deceased is a very special lady. She has had a hard life. Iôm not sure if it rivals St. Paulôs, but by my standards it has been extremely hardé .

If you ask this lady what has kept her going through life she will tell you unhesitatingly that it is her faith. At the funeral on Monday we said farewell to her husband. Of course it was a sad occasion. The children mourned their father; the widow mourned her life partner. But the people wore white, just like Christians in the early centuries did, as a sign of the resurrection. There was much extremely beautiful singing, led without musical accompaniment by the bereaved lady and her family. Children played a full part in the service. And throughout, there was what seemed to me an extraordinary sense of faith, and of joy.

So as I draw to a close, this evening, I ask us all, as I ask myself, does my life manifest this characteristic of joy? With the clocks changing, the dark evenings, the knowledge that winter is on its way, can I keep alive in my heart that sense of rejoicing that came naturally to St. Paul? Am I allowing myself to be ground down by the pressures of life and work, so that I risk becoming jaded, or miserable or cynical? Or can I keep the roots of my faith sufficiently strong that the fruit of the Spirité .love, joy, peace, flourish abundantly? ñFinally my brothers and sistersò, says Paul in the opening verse of chapter 3, ñRejoice in the Lordò. And in chapter 4, in case his readers havenôt got the message he repeats: ñRejoice in the Lord always, and again I say ñrejoiceò. Indeed I pray that God will give to each of us and to our community a true sense of joy that will be lifegiving and life enriching.