

ATTITUDE
Philippians 2 1 – 18

The verse 16 in our passage this evening ‘ that I did not run or labour for nothing’ struck a chord with me yesterday morning... Yesterday I was here at the church, helping out with filling that massive skip outside full of rubbish accumulated around the church over many years. Yesterday, I was in bits of the church that I have never really been in before, the cellar of church house where there are boxes and boxes of old church records, some a bit moldy and falling apart, others just very very dusty and dirty, but looking at all that paper, all those boxes of stuff, reminded me that it was not rubbish, but part of the story of this church, part of the story of the people who have made up this church over many years. These papers recorded events, meetings, occasions that were important at some point in the churches life and whereas some of the papers could not be kept, the things that they recorded will still be in some people’s memories, and perhaps most importantly, the occasions and things that they recorded are a reminder of the history of this church and the fact that this church is not made up of its buildings but what happens in the buildings - what people do here, what starts here, and what finishes here.

The papers were and are a record of what people have done here, building up a community of faith, a community of people who worship God and want to honour God through different activities and look to find different ways to do so – whether it be clearing out decades of old stuff or building up a choir, or organizing homegroups or baking stuff to sell in aid of social projects. And this made me think about tonight’s theme of attitude. What is our attitude to our church? Is it a place we come to be given teaching on God and Christianity, where we are consumers or is it a place where we all contribute, with our own skills and interest, to building up a community of faith? Do we make this church shine by our collective actions and our attitudes? Do we shine in our workplace and in our social networks because of our actions and attitudes that are nurtured and encouraged in this community?

We can often moan about how much of church life can be taken up with the maintenance of buildings – whether it can be the heating system we can read about in today’s notice sheet (and hopefully feel the benefits of this evening) or the need for volunteers yesterday to come fill that skip. This stuff can seem boring, not really connected to our Christian discipleship but I think we

can get that wrong.. yesterday, quite a lot of people turned up to help, people who have busy lives with family, work and friends, but who all turned up on a Saturday morning to get dirty and dusty and shift some junk.. Why? Because we were asked to? Perhaps, but perhaps there was something for each person who came who thought that if we have a church building that is clear of junk, it gives us more space to do the stuff we really want to be doing.. or perhaps there was also the thought that we are part of a community of this church and that that means getting involved in the not so 'clean' stuff as well as the other stuff we do.. in actual fact there was a real sense of team effort yesterday, different people doing different wee jobs – and big ones – and getting stuck in.. regardless of how dirty they got.. the attitude was that this was something that needed to be done and if we all muck in together, we can do it and make our church buildings nicer and better to use to further the mission of this church – to be a place of worship and welcome and discipleship . This goes on across our church, people taking on tasks and jobs that make our church community flourish- whether it is hosting home groups, doing flowers, music, welcome, making coffee etc..... it is an endless list.....; and there is much more to be done to make our buildings fit for purpose – to make them ready for another century of occasions and activities that we hope further the gospel and the life we all share in Christ –

But as we make our buildings fit for purpose we can also ask ourselves how we can make our community of people, here, in this church, fit for purpose too.. as we clear out the buildings, how do we ready ourselves to be able to use the church property in a way that glorifies God and further enhances our discipleship and community? What activities and actions do we need to develop, perhaps to take place on our premises, perhaps to take place in the wider Brussels community, that show who we are and what we believe and ultimately show God at work in us and our society -? What attitudes do we need to adopt to be fit to realize God's purpose here on earth, through this church?

I doubt that the congregation in Philippi was overly concerned about their church buildings.. they were probably more concerned about being Christians in Roman Colony – and perhaps that is how many of us feel in our lives here in Brussels. The Philippians were very new to faith, in fact because it was a Roman colony there were not so many Jews there to permit the establishment of a synagogue so they would not necessarily have known much about what we call the books of the Old testament and the pre Christ times. In fact, in his letter, Paul does not quote the Old

Testament at all which is unusual but representative of the fact that the Jewish history was not something familiar to the believers at Philippi. Rather, in this letter Paul is thanking the Philippians for their support and also giving them advice about attitude – about how to be fit for God's purpose, about how to live in the way commanded by Christ. He was not doing this to chastise them for how they had been living previously but rather to encourage them, to show them what God wanted for them and how this could be realized through their faith in Christ.. to guide them how to live in God's purpose and use the attitudes that come from that to build Christ's community on earth.

So in our reading tonight we see how Paul encourages the Philippians and we can also see how we can be encouraged to live in a certain way that allows us to have the attitudes that help us realize our purpose.

So what is Paul saying? Well, firstly we are told that encouragement comes from living in the way that Christ lived. Jesus did not live for himself – he lived for others. Throughout the gospels we read how Jesus spent his life with and for other people – healing, teaching, comforting and most of all, loving. It would be wrong to say that Jesus did not have his own interests – but his interests were to see more people come to know and be reconciled to God, to live justly and with honour and humility and through that love of God develop a sense of concern for those around them. Jesus' concern for others and their relationship with God was so strong that it led to him making the ultimate sacrifice, the ultimate act of reconciliation and that was his death on the cross – he loved us so much that he did that – and God loves us so much that he let his son do that – because it was the only way that God's purpose for his creation could be realized and the only way in which God and his creation could be reconciled. Jesus' attitude was one that was based on concern for others and on the glory of God in all He did. And Paul is quite clear in verse 5 that our attitude should be the same as Jesus – that we should live with a sense of humility, without ambition, with love and with a concern for the interests of others.

But we are not Jesus.. we are not even Paul's.. we are who we are and we are shaped by the fragmented, prideful, ambitious, wealth and power driven societies we live in – how can we live with the same attitude as Jesus when it goes against nearly everything going on in our societies today? Yet the Philippians were in the same position – here they were Christians in the most

ambitious society on earth at their time – a Roman society focused on power, gain, wealth and prestige.. just as we are today. And Paul is telling the Philippians, and us, to turn that all on its head.. to reject the way our societies are operating and stay focused on how Jesus operated – to live for others and not for ourselves. That is not to say we cannot have concern for our own wellbeing and happiness, in fact in verse 4 we are told that we not look to our own interests but to those of others – but if we are truly united in Christ – that is, if we accept through our faith in Jesus that we have an intimate, personal relationship with Christ as our savior, then from the relationship will flow the desire to be like Christ and to live with Christ like attitudes – to live in fellowship and concern with each other – our individual concerns should become our collective concerns – our individual struggles and pain can become collective struggles and pain – and our individual happiness and joy becomes collective happiness and joy – our purpose is to live with a sense of the other – of how our attitudes and actions affect each other and our wider world.

So what does this actually look like – what does living for each other mean in our Brussels reality?

Paul draws on a Christian hymn, which we could assume the readers of his letter knew, to stress what living for others is like through the figure of Jesus. The overwhelming characteristic is that of humility – putting aside personal gain and living with the nature of servant. Being humble or living in humility does not come easy to us.. but we can be encouraged by our faith in God – because putting our faith in God is act of humility in itself – we are saying to God – I can't live this life without you – I need you to guide me, to strengthen me, to help me make the right decisions and I trust that you are the creator of all and that you have a plan for me that I am ready to follow – we adopt an attitude of humility in the very essence of our relationship with God – in prayer we ask God to work in situations that we cannot control or often solve – we recognize Gods greatness over us – and we try to be obedient to God because of us – we will never do it as perfectly as Jesus did – we cannot – but we have Godward humility because of our acceptance of Jesus as the way to God.

From this Godward humility we are called to display humility to our fellow men and women... when we take decisions about our lives we need to think about how those decisions affect others.. we need to think if the way we live our Christian lives encourages other Christians – and indeed encourages those who are exploring faith. We need to humble ourselves to each other – asking

each other for help, advice and guidance.. we need to live humbly in fellowship with other so that we strengthen each other.

I love Desmond Tutu.. I think he always seems like the happiest person on the earth.. If I could meet one person I think it would be him – to ask him how he remains so full of joy and compassion and humility.. he really is one of the shining stars we read about in this passage. When I travel to different countries I like to read books about the people or history of the country. I have been lucky enough to have been in South Africa a few times and the first time I was there I read Nelson Mandela's biography and the second time I read Desmond Tutu's autobiography, *Rabble Rouser for God* – what a great title.. as well as his book on the South African truth and reconciliation commission. In both books Tutu talks about a concept called Ubuntu.. Ubuntu is a Nguni word which has no direct translation into English, but is used to describe a particular African worldview in which people can only find fulfilment through interacting with other people. Thus it represents a spirit of kinship across both race and creed which united mankind to a common purpose. Essentially, says Tutu *'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in what is yours'...*" Ubuntu is way of describing the sort of humility we are called to as Christians – recognising that our lives are connected to each other and cannot be separated because we are all connected through Christ.. I cannot ignore your need just as you cannot ignore my need because our needs are bound up in Christ. I cannot ignore your happiness just as you cannot ignore my happiness because our happiness is bound up in Christ.. I cannot live on my own just as you cannot live on your own as our very existence is bound together in Christ. Humility is accepting the concept of Ubuntu, of togetherness, of interdependence, of understanding the needs of others and seeking to answer those needs.

This week I was asked to speak to another Christian group about my work in Christian social justice and services. In the course of the question and answer session I was asked what I thought about the growing occupy movement and in particular the actions of St Paul's Cathedral in London and their attitude to the protestors camped outside their church. What followed was a fairly lively debate on the legitimacy or not of the protestors – and honestly, I have my questions about the occupy movement – but what perhaps provoked more debate was how St Pauls reacted – should it have opened up and essentially joined the protesters – or was it right what they did in the first instance which was to close up the church for fear of harm to the church buildings? There are

many different opinions on this and I don't think I have ever heard as many people asking 'what would Jesus do' on UK media as I have in the past two weeks.. although I had to laugh when someone said that Jesus would probably not charge a fee to get into a cathedral in the first place...and I am sure there are many opinions here – but if we focus on the reason for the protests – inequalities, poverty, concentration of wealth and power, the growing lack of confidence in political structures and representatives, we could see that in the spirit of ubuntu, of humility, of putting the interests of others before ourselves, then we can see that we have to care about the causes of this situation because the attitude we are called to have before God is this attitude of humility, of interest in the concerns and needs of others over our own desires. We need, as Christians, to engage in what is going on around us, both in our immediate environments and in the wider world – not for our gain, but to ensure the wellbeing of others, just as Christ ensured our spiritual wellbeing through his death and resurrection.

Just as the Philippians were called to live with an attitude of humility so we are called to live that way here in Brussels. We are called to be fit for purpose – for Gods purpose, through that humility. We are called to ask ourselves what is it that I can do to encourage others, to serve each other, to do God's will. What resources do I have at my disposal that I can use to build a little bit of God's kingdom here on earth, in these buildings? Or perhaps you are called to use your resources elsewhere. But yesterday, I saw a bit of that purpose in clearing out these buildings as part of a process to make these buildings fit for purpose – for God's purpose – not our own desire to have nice looking building we can show off but to have a place where we can hold meetings and activities and fellowship that will encourage us, strengthen us, live out God's vision for a community of faith – where we hold out the word of life.. We each have a responsibility to do that – to come up with ideas, to take actions that develop our spiritual life and community here and in the wider world.. to work together for God's glory and not our own..

It is a tough thing to do – to put aside our natural attitude of self and change it for the attitude of other, of humility, of Ubuntu.. but we are encouraged by God, and we are encouraged in knowing that God is rejoicing as we do it.. I think God was rejoicing seeing a group of people clearing out the church yesterday.. I think God rejoices when he sees homegroups meet and pray for the needs of each other.. I think God rejoices when we spend time with one of our brothers or sisters who are hurting in some way and he rejoices when we happily come together and say we are

one people, united through Christ and willing to live through each other and for each other for God's Glory. That's the attitude Jesus modelled for us, that is what will make this church, this community and these buildings shine.. for it is God who works in us for his will and all we do would be an act according to God's purpose.. then we – wherever we are will be fit for purpose because our attitudes will be shaped by God's purpose. Amen.