

Philippians 1.27 – 2.4

Standing as one

Amington (St Editha)

Sunday 21 August 2016

Chinese jumpers

I think it was possibly during the Beijing Olympics that I first heard the question: ¶ ‘If everyone in China jumped at the same time, would the Earth move?’ Have you ever wondered that?

How many people think ‘yes’? How many people think ‘no’?

Well, I did a bit of research on the internet, and apparently, if every single person in the world – all seven billion of us – if we all stood shoulder to shoulder, we would fit inside the M25, quite easily.

Then, if every one of us, all seven billion humans, jumped *at the same time* 30cm into the air and back down again, the earth would move... ¶... by an amount so tiny it won’t fit on the screen. It has thirteen zeroes before you get to the first proper number.

So, if you put your hands up earlier and said ‘yes’, you are *technically* correct. But if you said ‘no’, you won the moral victory.

Thankfully then Paul has a much better reason for us to stand united, than to try and move our planet by jumping, so let's move on, shall we?!



Unity: standing firm (1.27-30)

Our passage this morning – which you can find on page ____, so please grab your Bibles and have that open (at Philippians 1.27) – our passage begins with the words **whatever happens**.

§ **Whatever happens...** only... always... in all circumstances... above all... in every way... *do this*. That's what Paul is saying here: this is the *most important thing*.

Whatever happens, Paul says, **conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ** (1.27). So what does that look like?

In 2012 my family and I were fortunate enough to get tickets to the Olympics in London, including one evening the Olympic stadium. We saw the 800m heats, which included a Team GB runner called Andrew Osagie. You would not believe the sound in that stadium as he ran round the track. It was like a Mexican wave – but of sound, following him round the track, as most of the 80,000 people in there were British, and all cheering together!

He was struggling in the second lap, so the noise got louder and louder, and it obviously inspired him, because from nowhere he powered ahead to come second, and qualify for the final. He shocked himself  – and the stadium went berserk! In case you can't see how shocked he was, I've zoomed in a bit .

Paul says (verse 27):

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that... you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel.


Philippians 1.27 (NIV)

That little word 'striving' comes from the same word that we get our word 'athlete' from.

And the thing about Olympic athletes is, they give everything, don't they? They train so hard, with such discipline, and then when they compete, they give absolutely everything.

Friends, that is how Paul says Christians should live. He says: **stand firm in the one Spirit**, with one soul contend as athletes **for the faith of the gospel** (1.27).

Strive, he says... strive **together**.

He knows we need each other, because he knows how real our **opponents** are (1.28). Paul doesn't tell us much about them, except that they are frightening – the word he uses there actually describes  a stampeding herd of startled horses.

In verses 29-30, Paul tells them:

For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear I still have.

Philippians 1.29-30 (NIV)

Faith is a gift he says – and so is suffering. Now, we will hear a bit more about suffering in a couple of weeks' time, so I don't want to go into it now. But I will say what Paul does *not* mean here. He does *not* mean that everything bad that happens to us is a gift from God, as if God is like some malevolent schoolboy, using a magnifying glass to focus the sun's rays on a helpless spider.

No: the important part of the phrase is **suffer for his sake**. Paul is talking about suffering *as* Christians, *because* we are Christians. The sinful world wants to be god, and so when we stand up for the gospel and say, 'No: *God* is god', it gets angry.

The gospel shows it that because it tries to take god's place, the world is heading for **destruction** (1.29), and it doesn't like hearing that, so it fights back!

It's easy to be scared of the world, to be frightened of standing up for what we believe, in case we are publicly mocked or ridiculed, especially by those we love. This is why the church too often retreats into blandness, niceness, 'God loves everyone' platitudes.

But that isn't **standing firm for the faith of the gospel** (1.27)– that is what's known as running away!

Paul knew that when we *do* stand up for the faith, we will get shot at – but as he says, that should *encourage* us, because it is a **sign** of our **salvation** (1.28); it shows we're doing what we *should* be doing: **standing firm, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel.**

Unity: it begins with 'U' (not 'ME') (2.1-4)

Friends, the biggest barrier the church faces, is not out there *point outside*, it's in here *gesture to the congregation* – in fact, it's in here *tap heart*. That's why our reading this morning crosses into the next chapter. I hope you all realise that the chapters, verses, and helpful headings are all added by the translators – they weren't actually part of the original books.

And chapter 2 begins with that always-helpful word **therefore**. It tells us, ‘this next bit is related to that last bit’.

That’s because Paul knew that the biggest barrier the church faces is *not* out there, but in here. Listen to what Paul says:

Therefore

if you have any encouragement from

being united with Christ,

if any comfort from his love,

if any common sharing in the Spirit,

if any tenderness and compassion, then

make my joy complete by

being like-minded,

having the same love,

being one in spirit

and of one mind.

Philippians 2.1-2 (NIV)

§ If you look on the screen at how I’ve arranged the words you’ll see I’ve split it into two sections.

In the first ¶, Paul tells them what they *already have*. He repeats ‘if’ four times as a rhetorical device – like saying, ‘if chocolate is delicious...’ provoking the response, ‘*of course* it is!’

Paul says: you **are** united with Christ, you **have** his love, you **do** share in the Spirit, you **receive** God’s tenderness and compassion. *This is what you are, this is what you have*, Paul says. It’s a pretty good list. Paul tells the Philippians: you are united with Christ, you all know the love of God, you all share in the one Spirit – *this is who you are*.

But that isn’t enough. Look at the second half with me ¶:

Therefore...

make my joy complete by
being like-minded,
having the same love,
being one in spirit
and of one mind.

Philippians 2.1-2 (NIV)

First, Paul says, ‘This is what you are.’ But second he says, ‘So be like that!’ You *are* one, he says, so *be* one!

This is so important. We’re going to come back to it next week.

There is a deep reality to our identity as Christians, Paul says. We are united with Christ, and so we are united with one another.

But we aren't perfect, so that deep unity doesn't always make it to the surface, where it is visible, to us and to the world. So Paul often says in his letters, effectively: **be what you are**, let the truth of who you are in Christ be visible in your behaviour, in what you say and what you do: *that* is what it means to **conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ** (1.27).

How hard do we try to be united? I mean, *really*? How hard do we try to be one family, to be one fellowship?

I know I haven't been here very long, but already I think that word might be the most important word for us in the next months and years: fellowship. We need to be intentional about growing it.

Because that's what we need. But we haven't come to the problem yet. Paul says: *that* is what you are, so *be* what you are – and *this* is what will stop you (verse 3):

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

Philippians 2.3-4 (NIV)

Do **nothing** – in other words... well, actually I don't think that needs to be explained. It needs to be heard, and heard all the way into our hearts.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. They are two sides of the same thing, they are the biggest barrier to Christian fellowship, to strong unity. I think it's J John who says, 'at the heart of the human problem is the human heart.'

When we act **out of selfish ambition or vain conceit**, who are we putting first? Me, myself, and I. Other people become objects to be used for our own ends.

When we act **out of selfish ambition or vain conceit**, we end up with the opposite of what God has given us.

Instead of encouragement, we create § discouragement. Instead of comfort, we cause § distress. Instead of common sharing, we § exclude others. Instead of being full of tenderness, we § dislike others. Instead of sympathy, we show § disdain.

Which list looks better to you? I don't know about you, but I want our church family to be full of things in List A and nothing at all from List B!

How can you genuinely encourage and comfort others, how can you share with them the love and compassion of God, if you think you are better than them? How can you show tenderness and sympathy to others, if you think your needs are higher than theirs? How can we be united, if we all think the most important person in this church, is ‘me’?

That’s why **I** unity begins with ‘u’ – **I** not me!

True humility isn’t false modesty, but a proper understanding of who we are: creatures not the Creator.

True humility isn’t about thinking other people are *worth* more than *me*, but *valuing* them above *myself*.

True humility doesn’t ask, ‘what can I get out of this church family?’ but, ‘how can I serve the needs of my Christian brothers and sisters?’

Paul’s joy

Did you spot the reference to joy this week? Paul says, in chapter 2 verse 2, **make my joy complete** (2.2). Even from prison, his desire is to see the Philippians live out their faith.

Even from prison, all Paul wants is to see and hear that they are standing firm, striving side-by-side for the gospel.

Even from prison, he says **make my joy complete** by being united, by being humble, by living like Jesus, who is the perfect example of humility.

But that, my friends, is for next week.

This week, your homework is this: ask yourself, how can I serve my Christian brothers and sisters, how can I put their needs above my own?

Let's start being intentional about our fellowship, so we can stand firm, together as one – and as we do that we will discover there is great joy in journeying *together*.