

GOD'S GRACE AND HUMAN FREEDOM IN OUR PRAYING

'You must work out your own salvation in fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, inspiring both the will and the deed, for his own chosen purposes.' (Philippians 2:12-13)

St Paul is sitting in prison. This is probably in Rome, though we don't know for sure. He's looking back on his ministry, and writing to churches he has founded around the Mediterranean, in this case the church in Philippi a Roman colony in northern Greece. There's a note of joy running through this letter— it's a very tender one, apart from a sideswipe at a few people who are still insisting on circumcision.

Philippi isn't a church riddled with divisions, like the church at Corinth. In his long wait in prison, Paul seems to be drawing comfort from the state of the Philippian church. But he's making sure that this state continues. *'If then our common life in Christ yields anything to stir the heart, any consolation of love, any participation in the Spirit, any warmth of affection or compassion, fill up my cup of happiness by thinking and feeling alike, and with the same love for one another and a common attitude of mind'*. And a few verses later Paul moves them to imitate Christ's humble obedience to his Father: *'Take to heart among yourselves what you find in Christ Jesus'*, he says, using a very early Christian hymn to drive his message home. Then, somewhat sadly, *'you're on your own now, I'm absent [and implying unlikely to return] and you must work out your own salvation, relying on God's presence and help.'*

I find these words hugely poignant. Not least because of the fact that 45 years ago all these words, and more, were put to music in the St Alban's Vicarage garden by John Smith. I can see him now, sitting in the sun with his guitar, his Bible, and pen and paper. Who was John Smith? He was the leader of the Saint Paul's Singers, from St Paul's Symonds Street in Auckland. The singers were a charismatic group who brought spiritual renewal to this parish - and with it, a real deepening of our spiritual fellowship with one another. Paul's words, *and* John's simple lyric version and gentle melody, *and* what we were then experiencing here in Eastbourne, all just came together. It can become real again.

And now to the verses with which I began: *'You must work out your own salvation in fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, inspiring both the will and the deed, for his own chosen purposes.'* Here Paul expresses, as well as it can be expressed, one of the central realities of Christian life. And that reality is the mysterious interaction between God's grace and our human freedom. The Church has wrestled with this down the ages, in theology and in daily living.

'You must work out your own salvation': This I think means, first of all, that the Philippian Church has to take responsibility for its own life, without Paul present to guide it. But almost certainly it also has a forward reference to the lifelong walk of the Church and its individual members into the fullness of salvation which comes with the return of Christ. Salvation is a process in time. A bishop travelling by rail once got bailed up by a bold passenger who asked him 'Are you saved?' The bishop didn't turn a hair and replied 'It depends what you mean. I was saved on the first Good Friday by Christ on the Cross, I *am being* saved, and I have a good hope that I *will be* saved'. A good answer.

'with fear and trembling': The journey into the fullness of salvation is not a walk in the park with Granddad. It's an awesome journey *with* the All Holy God already in their midst and yet into deeper and deeper union with that All Holy God. Paul sounds the note of joy again and again in this Epistle, but not at the expense of the awe of the creature before its Creator.

'for it is God who works in you, inspiring both the will and the deed, for his own chosen purposes': This is the crunch. We can't work our way into salvation in our own strength. We are saved by grace, God's grace, his unmerited loving powerful favour. We are utterly dependant on Him, for our very existence, and for our salvation into the fullness of fellowship with Him, as we are flawed and weak and often downright sinful. And yet, and yet, we do have our own part to play, for our union with God has to be one of mutual love, and God's love for us necessarily involves His respecting our freedom. It's sometimes put this way: 'Without God, we cannot, and without us, God will not'. Otherwise we can end up with a choice between God arbitrarily choosing to bestow His grace on X but not on Y **or** God welcoming people on the basis of works done in their own strength – a choice between 'predestination' or 'justification by works'.

Lots of head-scratching for theologians. Perhaps a partial answer lies in our human experience of loving each other, and in the nature of love itself. Again and again I've heard people say, and probably ypu have too, 'without my partner's love (or parent's or friend's love) I couldn't have turneo my life around'. Love empowers, releases, renews.

'it is God who works in you, inspiring both the will and the deed, for his own chosen purposes'. Note: both the will and the deed.

Now how does this relate to prayer? (For if John were standing here now, he would be preaching another sermon in his current series on prayer.) I think it relates to prayer very well indeed. At the heart of our journey into the fullness of salvation is the 'work' of emptying and humbling ourselves so that we are truly open to God's love and truly obedient to His will. And that can only be done in prayer. Prayer *is* fellowship with the God who loves us. Prayer *is* seeking the will of God and the power to obey it. And it requires both our 'work' and God's prior and continuing help.

- At the beginning of each daily morning service our Prayer Book places prayers like *'open our lips O Lord' 'and our mouth shall proclaim your praise'*. We need God's help to even *begin* to pray.
- At the beginning of the Eucharist, our Prayer Book, immediately after the greetings, places the prayer *'Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden; cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit so that we may truly love you and worthily praise your holy name, through our Saviour Jesus Christ'*. You see, it's the Holy Spirit who prays within us, and we need to open ourselves to Him, to join what He's doing, before we can truly worship 'in Spirit and in Truth'.
- As each of us comes into our place of worship, whether church or hall or in our prayer time at home, we need to 'centre' ourselves as part of our 'working out our salvation with fear and trembling'. The Epistle to the Hebrews exhorts us *'to offer acceptable worship with reverence and awe'*. By 'centering ourselves' I mean

preparing ourselves, reminding ourselves who it is whose Presence we are in, before launching into whatever prayers we use. Yes, we are always in God's Presence – that's the wonderful thing – and we can pray spontaneously anywhere at any time – I do. But there's a balanced combination to be sought of that *spontaneous prayer* and the *discipline of intentional prayer* (whether alone or with others). It's the doing both which bears the fruit. And *intentional* prayer requires us to be prepared. Otherwise it can become rote and formalistic, or casual and irreverent. And how seriously in our preparation do we take Jesus' command to be reconciled to one another, to forgive one another, before we approach the altar?

- I want to finish with some words about contemplative praying. Although it's rooted in the common worship and the fellowship of the Church, it's essentially a very personal and individual path to walk. And it's a path to the centre of our own being, where God dwells – and also to the centre of Christian spiritual experience down the ages, the experience of the mystics. The *starting points* for Christian prayer are multitudinous and expressed in countless different cultures and personality types and historical settings. But the more contemplative one's praying becomes, the more relevant the experience of contemplative Christians in other ages and cultures becomes. All are converging on a common centre.

Now 'contemplative praying' is where Paul's words '*it is God who works in you, inspiring both the will and the deed, for his own chosen purposes*' come truly alive, lucidly true, deeply challenging, as one moves from being 'active' in prayer to being more and more 'receptive' in prayer. To being still, and emptied of our false self, and open in naked faith to the God who is working in us. The contemplative knowledge of God is sheer gift. Our disciplines of silence and stillness which we struggle to maintain (for example in our Wednesday Retreat Days and Saturday contemplative prayer group are simply means to this end – ***openness to that gift.***

There is praise in Heaven – The book of Revelation is full of it. But there too is also silence, living silence in Heaven, beyond all human language.

'You must work out your own salvation in fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, inspiring both the will and the deed, for his own chosen purposes.'

Holy God, Holy and Mighty, Holy and Immortal, have mercy on us – and teach us to pray aright. Lord, hear our prayer, and let our cry come to you.

A sermon preached in the Parish of Eastbourne on 27 September 2020 by the Revd Canon Peter Stuart