



The Church of England
Diocese of Ely



All Loves Excelling

Lent Course 2017

Studies in the Letter to the Philippians

We pray to be generous and visible people of Jesus Christ

That is our vision and Paul's letter to the Philippians helps us with what it means to live out that vision. Indeed, I believe, there could not be a better basis in Scripture for our exploration of our diocesan vision.

The Letter to the Philippians is Paul's most generously orientated letter. Here, Paul discusses Christian friendship and generosity in the face of the servanthood of Christ, who gave up his glory to be the slave of all.

Paul helps us understand the depth of the word We in our vision statement. He shows us, as the people of Jesus Christ, a new and challenging way of living. This includes a radical call to generosity through reflecting on God's generosity and a challenge to live in our communities as people unafraid to name the name of Jesus Christ.

Imagine what could happen if we were shaped for humility of service as Paul sets out in this letter, just how deep and wide will be the peace of God which passes all understanding?

This course is entirely home-grown, which thrills me. My grateful thanks go to those who have written this material; Richard Darmody, James Blandford-Baker and Andy Chrich.

I am encouraged about the work that has gone into this, not only because we are invited to engage with the Bible, hymnody and the testimony of our friends in Christ for the season of Lent; but because we can go on benefiting from its insights in our parishes long after Lent. My hope is that you will use this material in any period of the coming year, or further beyond.

Throughout your Lent and Eastertide experience, remember that the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keeps your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of our Lord Jesus Christ. Hang onto this always. Living this blessing is at the heart of living the diocesan Strategy.

Keep praying with me, as I pray to grow in Christ.

I warmly commend these studies to you.

The Rt Revd Stephen Conway
The Bishop of Ely

'All Loves Excelling'

Introduction

The first 'lever of change' for the Ely 2025 Strategy is to 'Nurture a Confident People of God.' It is surely inevitable that to do this we must earth that nurturing in Scripture and pay close attention to the foundational documents of our Christian faith. These studies in Philippians for Lent 2017 seek to do just that through what is one of Paul's most upbeat and joyful letters in the New Testament. Writing from prison in Rome in perhaps the early 60s AD, Paul sends a letter of warm friendship and exhortation to a church he founded with Lydia (see Acts 16). Philippi then was a Roman colony near the eastern coast of Macedonia where retired soldiers of the Roman army and their families frequently settled. The majority of the population probably spoke Greek but there were many Roman citizens too. Since the city was not big enough to contain a synagogue the Jewish population would have been very small indeed (even Lydia is described as a Gentile convert).

Moral exhortations and discussions about the meaning of friendship were common in the ancient world. Here in Philippians Paul relentlessly rethinks and reinterprets such concepts by putting Jesus Christ at the centre of all moral thinking and all appeals to friendship. Through this focus on faith in Christ, what it means and what it looks like in the life of the Christian, he is able to

'rejoice always' and encourage others to do the same. Reading it through in one sitting (a really good way of preparing for these Lent studies), one cannot help but be moved to joy and thankfulness (which is surely Paul's intent).

What is clear throughout is that the friendship between Paul and the Philippian Christians enables a deep level of trust and honesty. Paul is able to speak into a situation where two people have fallen out with one another, he's able both to affirm the Philippians' faith and call them to a deeper trust in, and obedience to, Jesus ('Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus') and he's able, without arrogance, to hold up his own example of following Christ as something to be imitated.

The sessions of this Lent series are designed to help us engage with Paul's message in Philippians in multiple ways. We make use of the practice of 'dwelling in the word', exploring the themes of the text through music, worship and personal testimony, and spending time discussing the meaning of the text. We want to encourage each other to grow personally in confidence in our faith in the Lord Jesus and ask the questions that will lead to that faith being seen ever more clearly in the churches of our Diocese of Ely.

'I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.' (Philippians 1.6)

James Blandford-Baker.

Session One: Philippians 1.1-11

'All Loves Excelling'

As you begin today's session you may wish to have a candle, tealights and/or a 'prayer tree': see www.vocationsireland.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/prayer-tree-300x225.png (for a simple example)

Opening Prayer

Rejoice in the Lord always,
Again I will say, Rejoice.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

The Lord is near.

Lord, as we gather to open your word together, give us expectant hearts, open minds and spirits ready to be stirred by the Holy Spirit. Let us read not only with understanding and thankfulness, but also with a readiness to be renewed as servants of Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Testimony

See the testimony at www.elydiocese.org/worship-and-services/lent17/

First Reading of Philippians 1.1-11

Music for Reflection

Love Divine (tune: Blauenwern)

Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven, to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesu, thou art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation,
enter every trembling heart.

Come, almighty to deliver,
let us all thy grace receive;
suddenly return, and never,
nevermore thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.

Finish then thy new creation;
pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation
perfectly restored in thee:
changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise. »

Second Reading of Philippians 1.1-11

Reflection 1

Are there any thoughts, ideas or phrases that stand out in this passage for you, either because you are not sure what they mean, or because you find them interesting, exciting or challenging?

Reflection 2

When we write to our friends in a letter, a card, an email or a text, what do we start by saying? 'I hope you are well', or 'How are you doing?' 'I've been thinking of you, or missing you' perhaps. But just imagine receiving a letter from a friend or a colleague, or even a letter from the bishop, that begins, 'I thank God every time I think of you, and whenever I pray for you I am full of joy.' How encouraging would that be?

There is a real warmth to Paul's letter to the Philippians, as though he is writing to friends. He begins, not by addressing his Letter as he often does from Paul, apostle, but instead from Paul and Timothy, *servants* of Christ Jesus. It seems he does not feel the need to appeal to his authority as an *apostle*. Instead, in friendship, he refers to himself as a servant of Christ, and in the next chapter, will appeal to the example of Jesus Christ as the perfect picture for us all to copy of what it means to have humility and to be a servant.

A formal letter of the age might continue, 'Greetings!' Paul opts instead for 'Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.' Grace is Paul's summary word for why the message he brings is good news: that though we have done nothing to earn or deserve it, God through Jesus reaches out to his people with love, bringing peace and *shalom* in the sense of wholeness and wellbeing.

Paul's trip to Philippi to establish the church ended dramatically after his release from prison (Acts 16). When he writes that the Philippians share in God's grace, both in his imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel, there will be a jailer who vividly remembers strange prisoners who sat in chains singing hymns of praise on the night that he first put his faith in Christ.

Paul holds the work of God and our own Christian responsibility together. He rejoices at the faith of the Philippian church but he longs for that faith to be made known in a life-giving journey as disciples of Jesus. In words that must have been tremendously reassuring, he reminds them that it is God who began this work in them, and God who will bring it to completion when Christ comes again in glory. But in the meantime, he longs for them to grow in love for God and in knowledge of God leading to the ability to live their lives for God in Jesus Christ.

Questions for Discussion

1. When have you most recently felt thankfulness and joy?
What made you feel this way?
2. Paul describes himself as a 'servant or slave of Christ Jesus'.
What do you think he means by this description?
What words would you use to describe your own relationship with God?
3. What do the words 'grace' and 'peace' mean to you?
What do you think Paul meant by them?
4. Have you ever told anyone that you are praying for them, or thanking God for them?
If so, how did they respond? If not, is it something you feel you could try?
5. How can we become better at thanking God for those in our own lives and the lives of the church?
6. 'I am confident that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ' (v6). How would it change us in the church if we were to put our trust in this?
7. In verses 9 to 11, Paul prays for the Philippians that:
 - i) their love for God may
 - ii) overflow with knowledge and insight so that they
 - iii) live well as followers of Christ

If these were Paul's words to you, where do you think God might be calling you to focus your attention?
8. Is there anything you think God is calling you to do differently as a result of this time of study?

Music for Reflection

Listen again to 'Love Divine'. As the music plays, you may wish simply to have time for quiet prayer. Alternatively, you could light a tealight for something you wish to thank God or pray for. If you have a prayer tree, you may wish to write a prayer of thanksgiving, intercession or commitment to hang on the tree at this time.

Closing Prayer

O holy Jesus,
most merciful redeemer,
friend and brother,
may I know you more clearly,
love you more dearly
and follow you more nearly,
day by day. **Amen.**

The Lord's Prayer

The Grace

Andy Chrich

Session Two: Philippians 1.12-30

'My Soul's Shelter'

As you begin today's session you may wish to have a candle, chains (a simple metal link chain or even a paper chain) and an open Bible on a table in the centre of the room. If you used a prayer tree in the opening session it could helpfully be used again today.

Opening Prayer

High King of Heaven whose goodness exceeds both our knowing and our telling, pour into our hearts such gratitude for your Son, Jesus Christ, and for his sacrifice for us, that we may be sensitive to his will and prepared to follow wherever he leads us. For his sake. **Amen.**

Testimony

See the testimony at www.elydiocese.org/worship-and-services/lent17/

First Reading of Philippians 1.12-30

Music for Reflection

Be Thou my Vision

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
be all else but naught to me, save that thou art;
be thou my best thought in the day and
the night,
both waking and sleeping, thy presence
my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,
be thou ever with me, and I with thee Lord;
be thou my great Father, and I thy true son;
be thou in me dwelling, and I with thee one.

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for
the fight;
be thou my whole armour, be thou my
true might;
be thou my soul's shelter, be thou my
strong tower:
O raise thou me heavenward, great Power
of my power.

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise:
be thou mine inheritance now and always;
be thou and thou only the first in my heart;
O Sovereign of heaven, my treasure
thou art.

High King of heaven, thou heaven's
bright sun,
O grant me its joys after victory is won;
great Heart of my own heart, whatever
befall,
still be thou my vision, O Ruler of all.

Second Reading of Philippians 1.12-30

Reflection 1

What pictures, images, words or impressions struck you as you listened to tonight's verses? How might these be speaking to you about where you are and about what may be emerging in your life?

Reflection 2

Living a life for God in Jesus Christ, having him as our soul's shelter, doesn't mean a life which is problem free. In today's reading we discover that Paul is in prison in Rome. Acts chapter 28 tells us that he was placed there under house arrest. Even so he was still guarded by the Emperor's crack force, the 'imperial guard.' His imprisonment was not for what we would regard as criminal activity but 'for Christ' (v 13). This was shorthand for saying that, like some in today's world, his faith was seen as a threat to the authorities.

What is interesting is that Paul doesn't use his letter-writing-time to moan about his conditions: the food, the guards or losing his freedom. He might well have felt that his life was going nowhere. Since he was first arrested back in Jerusalem he has spent four years incarcerated and unable to lead a normal life. Instead, as we will see throughout this letter, his mood is one of rejoicing, not complaining (v 18).

What is the reason for his composure? As the opening words in our passage tell us, the passion of Paul's life was the gospel. This theme runs through this letter like a thread; not me but Christ first. Ever since his conversion on the Damascus Road his whole life was devoted to Jesus Christ and to making this gospel known to others.

Unlike rare plants, you don't need ideal conditions for either of those passions. Living for Christ and spreading news about him can happen anywhere. Even in prison as it turns out. What seemed a waste of years became an opening. How else would you get the message to the heart of the Empire and even into Caesar's household? Our setbacks become our opportunities.

With the possibility for the faith to grow you would expect the whole church to get behind Paul. Some did and became bolder in their own witness as they took up the slack. Others used his absence for their own ambitions, to build their own little kingdom. How would we respond to people taking such advantage? Paul is glad that at least Christ is being preached, whatever their motive.

Unlike those who used religion to be ambitious, the final verses from 19 onwards call us all, like Paul, to allow our life to be shaped by the gospel itself; 'To live is Christ, to die is gain.'»

Questions for Discussion

1. What does tonight's Bible passage tell us about conditions which are suitable for the work of the church to flourish?
2. Have church members lost the passion to tell others about the gospel? What are suitable ways we could find to communicate Christ's message where we live?
3. Suffering is mentioned in connection with Paul's imprisonment and also in verse 29. Suffering is often seen as an obstacle to faith. Is it always such an obstacle?
4. Rejoicing in adverse circumstances seems a strange reaction to our culture. What place does joy have in the way Christians live and worship? Think of examples where joy has made a difference to others.
5. In verse 27 the Philippians are called to unity of spirit. This is a subject which will keep coming up in this letter. What incentives does Paul give for unity and how realistic is he? Are there steps we could take locally to create more Christian unity?
6. Those who preached Christ out of envy and selfish ambition must have added greatly to Paul's pain, yet he still accepted their message. Was he right to do this?
7. 'To die is gain' (v 21). Really? Look at Paul's approach to death. What are the lessons and encouragements we can draw from what is said here? How can they inspire us to live?
8. An old song says, 'I want to walk with Jesus Christ all the days I live of this life on earth.' Looking at the passage, spend some time as you end thinking about the ways to live for Christ in the modern world and how this might bring about real change where you live.

Music for Reflection

Listen again to 'Be thou my vision'. As the music plays, you may wish to thank God for the way that even in adversity, through his gracious provision, the church can flourish. Alternatively, you could use this time to pray for those who find themselves in captivity or in difficult circumstances today.

Prayer *(said together)*

Almighty God,
by whose grace alone
we are accepted and called to your service,
strengthen us by your Holy Spirit,
and make us worthy of our calling;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord.
Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

The Grace

Richard Darmody

Session Three: Philippians 2.1-30

'From Heaven You Came'

As you begin today's session you may wish to have a candle, a wooden cross and a bowl of water with a towel on a table in the middle of the room.

Opening Prayer

Rejoice in the Lord always

Again I will say, Rejoice

Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

The Lord is near.

God of Love, As we gather in your presence, draw us together and make us one in heart and mind, that united by a desire to know Christ and walk in his paths, we may be shaped by your Spirit ever more into his likeness to the glory of your name. **Amen.**

Testimony

See the testimony at www.elydiocese.org/worship-and-services/lent17/

First Reading of Philippians 2.1-30

Music for Reflection

From Heaven You Came or At the Name of Jesus

From heaven you came, helpless babe,
Entered our world, your glory veiled;

not to be served but to serve
And give your life that we might live.

This is our God, the Servant King,
He calls us now to follow him,
To bring our lives as a daily offering
Of worship to the Servant King.

There in the garden of tears,
My heavy load he chose to bear;
His heart with sorrow was torn,
'Yet not my will but yours,' he said.

Come, see his hands and his feet,
The scars that speak of sacrifice,
Hands that flung stars into space
To cruel nails surrendered.

So let us learn how to serve,
And in our lives enthrone him;
Each other's needs to prefer,
For it is Christ we're serving

At the Name of Jesus

At the name of Jesus, Every knee shall bow,
every tongue confess him, King of glory now.
'Tis the Father's pleasure, we should call him
Lord,
who from the beginning, was the mighty Word.

Humbled for a season, to receive a name,
from the lips of sinners, unto whom he
came.

Faithfully he bore it, spotless to the last,
brought it back victorious, when from
death he passed. »

Second Reading of Philippians 2.1-30

Reflection 1

What are the thoughts, ideas or phrases that stand out in this passage for you, either because you are not sure what they mean, or because you find them interesting, exciting or challenging?

Reflection 2

After the race, at the trackside, the winning athlete speaks to the press: 'Most of all I would like to thank my coach, who has been with me through all the highs and lows.'

When Paul asks the Philippians to 'make his joy complete' (v2) something similar is being expressed. He has seen the Philippian church grow in number and in maturity, and he longs to coach them onwards.

When any of us face a threat, we tend to respond fearfully or selfishly, but Paul sees a different way in Jesus. Drawing inspiration from their experience of encouragement in Christ, love from God the Father, and fellowship in the Holy Spirit, the Philippians are to be radically countercultural. Humility is to be a key virtue. No-one is to act out of selfish ambition or vain conceit (kenodoxia - literally 'empty honour'). Instead love begins when another's needs are more important than one's own, for that is what we see in Jesus Christ.

In words that take our breath away, Paul talks of Christ 'emptying' himself before being exalted and honoured. These verses (6 to 11) are known as the 'Christ hymn', and scholars

argue over whether Paul borrowed them, like a writer quoting song lyrics, or whether he wrote the poetry himself to illustrate his point. Either way, they have been an inspiration to generations.

The Philippians were familiar with the Imperial cult whereby around the Roman Empire, the emperor and his family were worshipped. At their death they were understood to become gods. In contrast Jesus, who is God the Son, chooses not to use his status to his advantage, but demonstrates that the true nature of God is self-emptying love. Fully God, he becomes fully human, and more than that, in his own words, comes 'not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10.45). We have had two thousand years of Christianity to get our heads around this. How incredible must the idea have seemed to the Philippians - God becomes a slave? A free man chooses crucifixion?

The last word, however, is not death but glorious resurrection and Jesus exalted. Jesus, through his death and resurrection is shown to be Lord, and at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.

Now Paul gets back to coaching. Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. This has puzzled Christians over the years. Surely we are justified by faith in Christ and not by works. Yes, but conscious of the awesome God we serve, we are to grow into our salvation, to learn to live it in all that we are and all that we do, shining like stars in the darkness.

How might we start to shine? Paul is down to earth and practical. For a start it would be good to refrain from bickering and arguing. It takes hard work and determination to communicate the truth, but lies and gossip »

can spread like wildfire, quickly undermining good work. Yet the Philippians are to take heart, for it is God who is at work in them

(see also 1.6), giving them strength to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Questions for Discussion

1. Paul talks of encouragement from Christ, comfort from God's love and fellowship in the Holy Spirit. What are your most treasured experiences as a Christian?
2. The unity of the church is seen as very important in verse 2. Why might it matter so much, and what can be done to encourage unity today?
3. 'In humility regard others as better than yourselves' (v3). What do you understand by humility? How easy is it to follow Paul's advice? Should there be limits?
4. Look closely at verses 6 to 8. What can we learn about Christ's humility from this section?
5. Read Mark 10.42-45 and look at how Paul's teaching here overlaps with Jesus' own words. What might it mean for us to follow this teaching of Jesus today?
6. Look closely at verses 9 to 11. What can we learn about Christ's exaltation from this section?
7. How might our churches better reflect Christ's humility and exalt him in our worship?
8. Why do you think Paul puts such an emphasis on 'murmuring and arguing' (v14)? How does it damage the Christian community and how can we avoid it?
9. Who are the people you have known who have 'shone like stars in this world' (v15)? How can we encourage each other to live as faithful disciples in our own generation?
10. Is there anything you think God is calling you to do differently as a result of this time of study?

Music for Reflection

As you listen again to one of the pieces of music for reflection, you may wish to write your own prayers of thanksgiving, confession or recommitment on 'Post-it' notes to fix them to the cross. Alternatively simply use the time for quiet prayer

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before

he was crucified: mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

The Grace

Andy Chrich

Session 4: Philippians 3

'My Heart's Desire'

You may wish to use the cross and candle from last week, together with a bowl and several pens and pieces of paper (note-sized). Invite participants, as they begin the session, to take time to consider what matters most in life to them. They may wish to write these things on a piece of paper, and at this stage fold the paper up and hold onto it.

Opening Prayer

Lord, as we turn to your Word and read about Paul counting everything as loss compared to the knowledge of Christ, open our hearts to receive your Son that we might live for him in this world until we become citizens of your heavenly kingdom. **Amen.**

Testimony

See the testimony at www.elydiocese.org/worship-and-services/lent17/

First Reading of Philippians 3

Music for Reflection

All I Once Held Dear

All I once held dear
Built my life upon
All this world reveres
And wants to own
All I once thought gain
I have counted loss
Spent and worthless now
Compared to this

*Knowing you Jesus, knowing you
There is no greater thing
You're my all, you're the best
You're my joy, my righteousness
And I love you Lord*

Now my heart's desire
Is to know you more
To be found in you
And known as yours
To possess by faith
What I could not earn
All surpassing gift of righteousness

Oh to know the power
of your risen life
And to know you in your sufferings
To become like you
In your death my Lord
So with you to live and never die

Second Reading of Philippians 3

Reflection 1

Share in the group the words which struck you during the reading of the passage and say why it may have felt significant.

Reflection 2

'Rejoice.' There is that word again, verse 1. We already saw Paul rejoicing in the Lord, even in prison. He now encourages the Philippian Christians to find the same joy, in spite of their trials. There will always be difficulties and problems which threaten our joy. What may this be for you? For the members of this church it was a group of people Paul describes in scathing terms as 'dogs, evil and mutilators' and at the end of the chapter as 'enemies.' Pretty strong language. His disgust is not because of any personal desire for revenge. What made them enemies is that their message was designed to draw the church away from Christ's message.

What is our Christian story? Paul tells his. Notice the striking similarities between the story of Jesus in chapter 2 and what Paul tells us about himself. Both stories follow a downward spiral and a refusal to cling on to privilege and honour. Paul is looking these opponents in the eye and telling them he can more than match them for status and zeal in the Jewish religion. He had a lot of reasons for worldly boasting. Yet he felt they

had been stripped away and he could never turn back to them. If he were to do an audit of his life Paul would put his previous status and lifestyle in the 'loss' column but knowing Christ in the 'gain' column (v 7). Christ became his heart's desire. For us, a previous life without Christ will probably look rather different because Paul was living in a very religious world. Yet we are asked to reflect where our confidence lies and how we would grade our past compared with our present (see v 8). What does our heart desire?

What we are being called into is a relationship with Jesus Christ described as 'knowing' Christ. Clearly it's a relationship which calls us from all those things we put our confidence in before, but which lacked 'faith' in Christ. It is a relationship which is not static but which moves on and deepens. It may involve suffering but we will have new resurrection life, until we reach the heavenly glory. Like the Olympic athlete pressing towards the finish (v 14-15) our race will require single-minded concentration, but we have a good supporting team.

The opponents wanted circumcision and other national customs such as food laws to be part of believing. Paul saw that Christ's faithfulness and Christian oneness are about trust in Christ's cross alone.

Questions for Discussion

1. Think of Paul's description of the opponents (vv 2, 18 and 19). Is this in keeping with following Jesus? Does this type of expressed outrage have any place in our Christian faith?
2. What may Paul's story in verses 4 to 11 say to our very different age? How would you explain it to a friend?
3. Is the negative description of Paul about his former life in verse 8 going too far? Or if not, why not?
4. Would you describe Christianity as a relationship? What does it mean to 'know Christ'?
5. To what extent is the Christian life being like a race true to reality (vv 13-14)? Can you think of stories from your own life which might support that description?
6. Paul talks in verse 12 about not having yet attained. What can our churches do to encourage greater Christian growth and attainment goal?
7. 'Our citizenship is in heaven' v 20. If this is so what responsibilities do Christians have in modern society and does a belief in heaven help at all?
8. What difference is this chapter going to make to your life? Review the chapter and share in your group what this difference will look like in reality.

Music for Reflection

As the music plays again, participants are invited to look again at the pieces of paper on which they wrote what matters most to them in life. Some may wish to place these pieces of paper in the bowl at the foot of the cross, as a sign of placing them in God's safe keeping and trusting him with them as they look to draw nearer to Christ.

Closing Prayer

Lord God,
Whose blessed Son our Saviour
Gave his back to the smiters
And did not hide his face from shame:
Give us grace to endure the sufferings of
this present time
With sure confidence in the glory that
shall be revealed;
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

The Grace

Richard Darmody

Session 5: Philippians 4.2-23

'Rejoice in the Lord Always'

As you begin today's session you may wish to have a candle, tealights and/ or a prayer tree. Another option, (one that requires a little 'health and safety planning' - and a venue without a smoke alarm!) would be to take a tin wrapped in foil on a heatproof mat or tile. Light a lump of charcoal in the tin, and have some grains of incense in a small bowl nearby).

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, as we study and discuss your word, help us to discover afresh the reconciling love of your Son Jesus Christ, the joy of the gospel and the peace that surpasses our understanding. **Amen.**

Testimony

See the testimony at www.elydiocese.org/worship-and-services/lent17/

First Reading of Philippians 4.2-23

Music for Reflection

In the Lord, I'll Be Ever Thankful (Taizé)
or **Now thank we all our God.** *An alternative would be to play a recording of Henry Purcell's, Rejoice in the Lord Alway (the 'Bell Anthem' as it is commonly known).*

In the Lord, I'll be ever thankful,
In the Lord, I will rejoice.
Look to God, do not be afraid,

Lift up your voices, the Lord is near.
Lift up your voices, the Lord is near.

Now Thank We All Our God

Now thank we all our God,
with heart and hands and voices,
who wondrous things hath done,
in whom his world rejoices;
who from our mother's arms
hath blessed us on our way
with countless gifts of love,
and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God
through all our life be near us,
with ever-joyful hearts
and blessed peace to cheer us;
and keep us in his grace,
and guide us when perplexed,
and free us from all ills
in this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God
the Father now be given,
the Son, and Holy Ghost,
supreme in highest heaven,
the one eternal God,
whom earth and heaven adore;
for thus it was, is now,
and shall be evermore.

Second Reading of Philippians 4.2-23

Reflection 1

What words, pictures or ideas stand out for you in this passage? Share with one another briefly what has drawn your attention.

Reflection 2

This final chapter of Philippians is one of the (many) parts of the Bible where the chapter divisions are not helpful guides to understanding what fits where! In the first three verses Paul exhorts two members of the Philippian church to be reconciled to one another. He obviously knows them personally and one can hear the deep affection with which he holds them both. As for us when two of our friends fall out, Paul's anguish over the situation is all the greater and so also the urging to 'have the same mind.'

The concluding part of Philippians really begins at v4 as the theme of joy and rejoicing returns. Paul often ends his letters with exhortations to deeper faith in Christ and to the faithful action that flows from it. Verses 4-7 focus on, as we might put it, 'spirituality' and verses 8-9 on Christian behaviour. The exhortations themselves would work well as a series of Tweets (at least for those of

us who no longer write many personal letters!). Perhaps Paul intended them as soundbites that would be readily recalled by those who first heard the letter read to them in a church gathering.

Did you hate writing thank you letters as a child? Many of us did. Finally Paul gets to his initial reason for writing, which is to thank the Philippians for their gift. Usually in our thank you letters as children we began with thanks and then tried to fill in the rest of the space with other things. They were letters written to be read. But Paul's letters were written to be heard. He has already dealt with the important matters of faith and now he wants to leave his hearers with his words of gratitude to them. His words are poetic and resonant: 'I know what it is to have little and I know what it is to have plenty'; he describes their gift as 'a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.' His appreciation is sincere and heartfelt and the Philippians cannot have failed to be assured of his gratitude.

Paul ends with the greetings typical of a letter of his time... with a wonderfully pointed twist as he (surely) delights in the fact that the gospel has penetrated imperial Rome even to its heart. The greetings of the saints of the Emperor's household would have encouraged the faithful of Roman Philippi to know the power of Christ to change and transform even those who were part of the structures of the state.

Questions for Discussion

1. vv2-3: Why do you think Paul takes the step of naming Euodia and Syntyche? Often when people disagree with each other in church our tendency is to step back and have nothing to do with their dispute. Yet Paul urges his 'local companion' (we don't know his or her name) to help in their reconciliation. What happens in your church community when people need to resolve conflicts with one another? Is there a person who is known to have the gift (and perhaps training) to bring about reconciliation? If 'being of the same mind' is as important to us as it was to Paul, what might we do to encourage the resolution of conflicts in our churches and make reconciliation a 'normal' part of being the church?
2. vv4-7: Joy and rejoicing are persistent themes in Philippians. This is extraordinary since Paul is writing from prison in a place of great personal stress and hardship. Paul's rejoicing has a particular character and focus; it takes place in the context of other kinds of prayer. How do you see this broader context and how might it shape your personal prayer life and that of your church community? Is there something to learn here about how we intercede together for the needs of the world and our own needs?
3. vv8: Paul seems to think that reflecting on (or perhaps 'taking account of') all that is good (see the list in v8) is an important and worthwhile activity of the Christian community. Take a few moments to do this together in your own context. How might you build in such reflection (which seems relentlessly positive!) into the regular life of your church?
4. v9: Paul is so supremely confident in what Christ has done to shape his mind and character that he can urge the Philippians to imitate him! Who has influenced you for good in your Christian life? Who lifts your spirits, reveals God's grace to you? How do they do this? What can you learn from their example that might bless others?
5. vv12-13: Have you learned 'what it is to have little' and 'what it is to have plenty'? What have you learned from times of hardship and times of ease? Paul writes of the 'secret' of being well fed and going hungry. What do you think this secret is? How can you learn it?
6. v14: Perhaps part of the 'secret' is knowing others walking alongside us and 'sharing our distress.' What effect has companionship in hardship had in your own life? How do you walk alongside others in distress as a church? Is there anyone for whom you need to 'revive' (v10) your concern? How might you do this? »

7. vv15-20: Think about a time when you were given a gift that helped you cope in a time of need, grief or distress. What is the culture of your church community? Do you easily and naturally give gifts to those in such circumstances? How might you grow in the ministry of giving gifts?
8. v22: It must have been tough for the Christians who were serving in the Emperor's household. How might we support and encourage those among us who serve in what are essentially hostile environments with values very different from our own?

Closing Prayer

Spend some time 'doing what it says on the tin' and bringing your requests to God with 'prayer and supplication with thanksgiving.' This process could be accompanied by lighting a tealight to accompany each prayer. Alternatively, taking a grain of incense to symbolise your prayer, and then dropping it onto the charcoal into the tin produces the wonderful effect of a pleasing fragrance, conveying the idea of our humble efforts transformed by God into something beautiful.

Then close by saying together:

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. **Amen.**

James Blandford-Baker

Leader's Notes

Timing

We anticipate groups meeting for 1½ hours where 1¼ hours are taken up with the material provided and then 15 minutes for prayer. The prayer time is really important so do be disciplined about this and move on to prayer even if you haven't managed to discuss all the questions. You may like to finish your time together with refreshments; this usually works better than having them at the beginning.

Leading the Group

The material here is offered in the hope that you will use it flexibly. For instance, you may like to move items (such as the music) around and use silence at certain points. We very much encourage you to do this.

Reading the Passage

Each session includes reading the passage through twice (in a similar way to the 'dwelling in the word' exercise that has become so widespread and appreciated in the diocese). It is a good idea to choose two different readers for this. We have deliberately not included the passages of

Scripture in full. Do encourage everyone to bring a Bible and help those don't know their way around it with finding the passage; this all builds important skills and confidence! We have used the New Revised Standard Version for preparing these studies.

Ending the Session

At the end of each session encourage the group to summarise what they have learned and think about how their church community might grow, refocus something they are doing already or start doing something new as a result. Then read these summary notes out at the beginning of the next session. This is great way of reinforcing what has been learned and growing together.

Ending the Course

At the end of the course take some time to think about whether the group has a future in meeting together to continue to grow as disciples of Jesus Christ. You may like to think about using material such as the Pilgrim Course (the format of which formed the basis of these sessions on Philippians).

Authorship

This material was produced by James Blandford-Baker, Andy Chrich, Richard Darmody and Hugh McCurdy. We have indicated who wrote what in the main text. We would be delighted to receive feedback on this material.

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Luke Fitzgerald - Keyboard

Geoffrey Smallwood - Producer

*The Parish church of All Saints' Harston -
Recording Venue*