

Philippians 1vv12-26

I must admit that I'm ashamed to say I've begun to spend far too much time on the internet. One day while logging on, one of those adverts caught my attention – "How to live to 100! The BBC Life Expectancy Calculator". My curiosity got the better of me, and I soon discovered that it enabled me to predict how long I would live. And I was relieved to find out that I won't be dead for another 58 years! What's more, if I were to change my lifestyle to be maximally healthy, I'll live til I'm 101!!! Unfortunately that would involve a house move, a change of family, a sex change, and, if you think that sounds unpleasant, becoming a vegetarian.

Our attention is easily caught, isn't it, by anything to do with living forever, or at least for as long as we possibly can. Our culture is full of it: The elixir of life, the holy grail, cryogenic freezing. Plastic surgery, wrinkle creams, anti ageing pills. Some people are obsessed by it. It's not the only obsession, though - if it's not eternal youth, it's career, or family, or girlfriend, house, sex, money, aliens, alcohol, music, friends, world peace, human rights - or just plain happiness. Or more subtly, but perhaps more common than anything else is an obsession with what other people

think of us – everything we do is done with the attitude "how will this make me look in front of them?"

I think that most of us know that it's not a good thing for a Christian to be preoccupied with these things, though of course they are a temptation and a distraction. And it's true that the idea of obsession does have all sorts of negative connotations, particularly if you're a psychiatrist, but really all that I mean by it is to have something, one thing, as the passion and driving force that motivates and lies behind all that someone does. So whether we realise it or not, we do all have one.

So if we all have an obsession, the question, of course, is what is the RIGHT thing to be obsessed with? What SHOULD be our driving force and motivation? As Christians, what SHOULD be our priority in life? Should it be helping others as much as we can, being the best doctors we possibly can be? Should it be first class expository Bible teaching? Or helping the homeless, social action? Should it be vibrant worship? Or correcting false doctrine? Should it be a desire to be in heaven? Should it be evangelism?

Well, in a way there are all sorts of right answers, aren't there. But in this passage we see what priority Paul has, and how this one priority relegates everything else to a lower division.

The first thing we see is this: **the advance of the gospel is more important than personal circumstances, v12-14.** Paul is more concerned with the preaching of the gospel than with whatever other difficulties he happened to be facing at the time.

Paul is writing this from a slightly unfortunate situation. The last few years have NOT gone to plan. It all started to go wrong in Jerusalem, where he was arrested and appeared before the Romans, then before the Sanhedrin, then back to the Romans, there was a plot to kill him, he was taken off to Caesarea and appeared before Felix. He kept him in prison for 2 years before another trial before Festus, another one before Agrippa, then he was put on another ship which was shipwrecked on Malta, before he finally arrived safely in Rome. There was no respite there though because as he writes this letter he's under 24 hr guard, "in chains", imprisoned by the Roman Empire's finest soldiers, and awaiting trial before the Roman Emperor – the

most powerful man in the world! – where he may well be sentenced to death. His plans for the spread of the gospel to new places are in tatters. Not much to write home about, really was it?

So from this desperate situation, Paul does write to his friends in Philippi to update them on his latest news and tell them how's he's getting on. How does he begin to share all that he is feeling - how does he express the pain, heartache, and frustrations of what's been happening to him?

Look at verse 12: "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel". Ok, Paul, but tell us more. How are you coping? What would you like us to pray for? Are your guards treating you well? We're your dear friends, and we want to know more. Well, there is more, but all he goes on to say about what's happening at his end is to elaborate on HOW the gospel is advancing. And it's advancing in 2 ways, which we see in verses 13 and 14. First, his guards now know something of the Gospel, that Paul "is in chains for Christ", v13, and second, Paul's imprisonment seems to have galvanised the rest of the Christians in Rome to evangelise as well, v14! "They have been encouraged to speak the Word of God more courageously and fearlessly".

Praise God! Isn't that a great example of how God is sovereign and his plans are very different to ours? But what I think is more extraordinary is Paul's attitude in this. Despite his desperate situation, all he wants to tell them is that the Gospel is advancing!

Surely Paul had every right to pour out his heart about how everything seemed to have gone wrong. To dwell on the physical pain, the indignity, the loss of his freedom, the fact that he really would rather be somewhere else. To ask the Philippian jailers to pray for his release. And no doubt he did feel these things, but it's remarkable that he just doesn't focus on HIS circumstances at all. His only reference is a passing remark - "what has happened to me". Compared to the advance of the gospel, his circumstances just aren't worth dwelling on! As long as the gospel is advancing, Paul will focus on that. It doesn't matter to him how rough a time of it he is having, and it doesn't matter to him that HIS plans are in disarray. All that matters is that the gospel is advancing.

What about us? Can we honestly say: all that matters is that the gospel is preached? What if we're having a really rough time of it? Many of us here ARE!

What if you fail your exams? Don't get that job or house you wanted? Split up with your girlfriend or boyfriend? Really under pressure with long hours and a horrible boss and no more summer holidays? Will we be distracted by these things - which are comparatively trivial - and forget the really important business of the advance of the gospel? What if something happens to us comparable to what happened to Paul?

Very often, I think, the way we react to difficulties in life says a lot about what our priorities are. And Paul's reaction certainly demonstrates what his priority is.

How about as a church? We plan and strategise - but what if our plans falter? Things might not go as we hope. Are we prepared that God will have something very different in mind? We pray, don't we, that Liverpool will be changed through the work of our church. We should pray much more for that! But we also have to be prepared for the possibility that all our grand plans for this church will have to be put on hold. What if the school suddenly decides that it doesn't want us anymore and we're kicked out of this building? What if our evangelism seems to fall on deaf ears and it's actually another church that ends up with all the

converts? What if we don't get a new church worker next year, as we'd like? How will we react if this happens? Will we be so self absorbed and small minded that we'll just wallow in self pity and forget the important business?

No, if OUR priority is the same as Paul's, the advance of the gospel will be far more important to us than our personal circumstances.

Secondly, then:

We should rejoice whenever the gospel is proclaimed, v15-18. The advance of the Gospel should be so important to us that as long as people are spreading the good news of Jesus, we will rejoice! And we will rejoice **however** they do it and **for whatever reasons** they do it!

Paul has already told us that his imprisonment has spurred on the local believers to preach the gospel. But it seems from verses 15-17, look at them now, that not all of the believers were going about this for very good reasons. There were some people who were preaching the gospel for selfish reasons, out of "envy and rivalry", "insincerely", rather than as a loving encouragement. It even seems quite personal, doesn't it? See in verse 17: they are

specifically trying to cause trouble for Paul. We don't know why they were doing this or how them preaching the gospel would stir up trouble for him, but it seems to be some kind of hate campaign or personal vendetta, doesn't it? Envy, rivalry, selfish ambition.

Now those of us who know Paul even a little will know that he doesn't pull any punches when it comes to this kind of thing. He comes down pretty hard on selfishness, lovelessness, divisions, rivalry. Look at Galatians 5, verse 20, on the screen here. People who live like this *will not inherit the kingdom of God*. That's what Paul says.

So we read this and suddenly come to verse 18. "What does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached" It's shocking, isn't it? Paul here almost doesn't seem to care about their sinful motives. "What does it matter, he says?" Has he changed his mind? I almost want to shake Paul and say "hang on a minute! Aren't you going to rebuke these people for their appalling attitudes? You should be saying how at this rate these people aren't going to inherit the kingdom of God! Have you gone all soft all of a sudden?!" But the reason I want to do that is because I haven't quite adopted Paul's priorities. I'm not quite on his wavelength.

You see, Paul is so keen that the gospel is preached, that to him motives are secondary. It doesn't matter how or why. Preaching Christ is simply in a different league of importance to motives. The important thing is that Christ is preached, verse 18, whatever the motives.

And so because Christ is preached, verse 18, Paul rejoices! The very people who wanted to make life difficult for him only serve to make him rejoice even more!

Now I must confess I can't actually think of any examples of people preaching the gospel in order to make life difficult for me or for anyone. And I certainly don't think I would be rejoicing if it did happen - I sometimes find it difficult to rejoice when the gospel is preached AT ALL! But if I had Paul's priority, I would!

Paul is not concerned as much about defending himself or his reputation or his particular corner of the Christian world, as with simply seeing Christ preached, no matter who does it or why they do it.

We must be very careful that we don't get so hung up about the **way** other people do things, or **why** they do things, that we stop rejoicing in the proclamation of the Gospel.

We MUST not allow an unhelpful attitude to develop towards other people, or churches, or student groups, who we don't get on with, for whatever reason.

What if we don't get on with the church down the road? Maybe we think that they don't teach the Bible very well, or have reservations about some particular doctrine they hold. Now I'm not saying that it isn't important to be concerned about these things. It is vitally important to stand for Biblical truth. But the point is that if they are faithfully preaching Christ, we must rejoice with them in that. We MUST not think that defending our particular corner of the Christian world, our way of doing things, is our priority. Seeing Christ preached should be our priority.

I think the student world is another example. In the last few years it has become increasingly divided. But will CU members become bitter and jealous if they hear that another student group is growing and loads of people are hearing the gospel? Or if you hear that Christ is being faithfully proclaimed will you first of all rejoice in that?

How about the relationship between the church and the CU? Those of us who aren't students could feel that the church does far too much for students and doesn't put enough

effort into older folk, and begin to resent student work. Whether that's true of this church or not, it must not become a reason not to rejoice in what the CU does, as it tells others of Christ.

As Christians, our priority should be to see the Gospel preached. If that is happening, whatever other imperfections there may be, or whatever reservations we may rightly have, we should be able to join with Paul and say "what does it matter?", and rejoice.

Let's look at the last section now, where we'll see that as well as prioritising the advance of the gospel, and the preaching of Christ, adopting Paul's priority will mean **a change in our perspective on life and death, v18b-26.** We will have to change our perspective on life and death.

In the second part of verse 18 Paul continues with the theme of rejoicing, where as he looks forwards to his trial, he rejoices because he is confident that he will be "delivered" from his present situation. Now this is a slightly tricky phrase, as is the rest of verses 19-20, but it's probably best to understand "deliverance" as something like

"vindication". So Paul isn't asking them here to pray for his release from prison. In fact, verse 20 suggests that what Paul means by deliverance is that he won't be ashamed. So, Paul looks forward and is confident that he will be courageous enough to provide a good defence of the gospel, so that he exalts, glorifies, or more literally "magnifies" Christ, verse 20, which is the ultimate aim. So the way he is vindicated and delivered is when Christ is exalted by his defence of the Gospel.

As long as he is courageous and defends the gospel, Christ will be exalted whether he is released or executed, whether he lives or dies, verse 20. That is all that matters. Incredible, isn't it. The exaltation of Christ is more important than life or death. It's all-important to him. It the prospect of it makes him rejoice. And it should be the same for us.

But if Christ is exalted by death or by life, what should our attitude to life and death be? Should we CARE whether we live or die? In verse 21 Paul says that for him "to live is Christ, and to die is gain". What does that mean?

Well, we see what Paul's perspective on this is in verses 22 and onwards. And we see that he seems to have

real difficulty choosing which he'd prefer – death, or life. He's torn between the two, v23.

One thing he's very clear about is that if he dies, he'll be with Christ, and that, verse 23, is far better than living. To die is gain! Which you might think would settle it. Case closed? It's not that simple, is it. Even though being in heaven with Jesus is better for Paul, him remaining on earth is better for the Philippians, verse 24. If he "remains in the body", they will progress in their faith, verse 25, and ultimately it will mean that they will rejoice, or glory, in Christ, verse 26!

My sister in law is about to have her second baby. I don't really know why because her first is just the cutest and most adorable – and well behaved – child you could wish to meet. So this second one is bound to be a let down, I reckon. But her ultimate focus is having that baby, and she really can't wait for it all to be over. Not only is it hard work carrying a baby and even harder work giving birth to one, she's also really looking forward to meeting and being with the new addition to the family. If it was down to her, she'd have the baby yesterday! She's definitely going to have that baby sometime soon, she knows that for sure.

But she recognises that it really is best for that baby if she holds onto it for just a little bit longer. For her, the end result is the same – she has a baby. But the baby is much more likely to be healthy if she waits a little, til the nine months is up

There is no question that it was in Paul's best interests, if you like, to be with Christ sooner rather than later. He would love to be in heaven – yesterday. But like with Dawn, there's something that's more important that keeps him from simply choosing what's best for him. There's something that makes him put their spiritual health before his own personal comfort and happiness.

What is it, then? Is he simply an incredibly selfless Christian? Well, he is, but there's more than that. Look at verse 26 again: "through my being with you again **your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow** on account of me." This idea of joy in Christ Jesus, or glorying in Jesus, is very similar to the idea of Christ being exalted, in verse 20. And that, remember, is his constant hope. As they grow, they glory in Christ and so exalt Christ. That ultimate end of exalting Christ is what tears Paul in two.

More than simply being concerned for their spiritual wellbeing, Paul is concerned for the exaltation and glory of Christ. As strong as Paul's desire to be with Christ is, his desire to see Christ exalted "tears him in two". I think this is partly what it means "to live is Christ". For Paul, to live is to see Christ exalted.

Well what are we to learn from this?

Do we have such a desire to be with Christ that we think to die is gain, that heaven is "better by far"? Or is what we really think "heaven will be great, but for the moment I'm quite happy here? With my nice pay packet and shiny car and beautiful wife and respectable position in society?" For Paul, he ached to get to heaven, and there had to be something pretty important to keep him on earth. To live is Christ, yes, but to die is gain because to die is to BE WITH Christ. Heaven will be much better than earth. Much much much better.

Have some things become so important to us that we wouldn't willingly give them up right now in order to be with Christ? You may be engaged, or recently married, and really looking forwards to the rest of your life with your

gorgeous husband or wife. Or to seeing your children grow up. But do you remember that heaven will be so much better even than that? How about finishing your degree, or decorating your house? The amount of home improvement programmes on the TV these days should be a warning to us that it can become all-important.

Much of the time, I think, we're not torn between two things at all, we're quite content right here, thank you very much. We're intrigued by the BBC life expectancy calculator. We'd quite like to live to 100 and spend many happy retirement years cruising the Nile.

But just as we should be pulled in one direction by our desire to heaven, so there should be another pull that makes us want to "labour fruitfully" on earth. And that pull, like Paul, should be to see Christ exalted as other believers grow and progress in their faith. I doubt that many of us can say that "I would rather be in heaven right now, except for the fact that I can help others in their Christian life." For us, all too often our priority is all those things we mentioned at the beginning. Anything that extends our life or our youth for as long as possible. Career, marriage, holidays, happiness. What others think of us.

What do we see as our “meaning of life”? To exalt Christ?

Why do we come to church? Yes, to learn about God and to praise him. But if we have Paul’s perspective on life and death, we’ll recognise that in heaven we can praise God endlessly and know God perfectly, the one thing we can’t do there is help other Christians in their faith. So coming to church and to CU and to house groups should be very much about each others spiritual progress.

That will work itself out in countless ways. It will mean that we won’t want to get so engrossed in our work, which can be all-consuming, that we don’t have time for our churches or our Christian friends. It will mean working hard at welcoming people into the church family, opening our homes to each other, sharing our lives with each other. And there’s nothing more useful we can do than to pray with each other, and study God’s word together, is there? So if you don’t meet with someone to do that, why not start now? As a church we organise that kind of thing for students, but you needn’t wait for us to organise it for you - why not actively seek someone out who you could do that with.

Having this priority should change our focus from “what can I get out of church?” to “how can my presence here at Church and in life in general help other Christians in their faith?” And our ultimate focus will always be to see Christ exalted as others grow in their faith and rejoice in Christ.

So, as Christians here tonight, why don’t we all resolve, together, to be people who can say with Paul that we are torn between two desires. To desire heaven so much that we can truly call it “better by far”. But also to desire to see Christ exalted so much that we are willing to postpone heaven and labour fruitfully in order to help others in their faith.

So, after all this what is the Christian’s priority? What is the Christian doctor’s priority? Is it any different? Is it the advance of the gospel, and the preaching of the gospel – is it evangelism? Or is it seeing others grow in their faith – is it discipleship?

Well remember verse 20: Paul’s constant hope is the exaltation of Christ. The preaching of Christ and the advance of the Gospel ultimately are all about the exaltation

of Christ. Christ is exalted as the gospel advances, as Christ is preached, and we've already seen how Christ is exalted as other Christians grow in their faith and glory in Christ.

So the Christian's priority is the exaltation of Christ. It's a good definition of a Christian, I think – a "Christ exalter". So above all, let's be Christians, "Christ-exalters", who are committed to that by being committed to working hard, labouring fruitfully, at evangelism and discipleship, and who will not let anything distract us from it. Who will rejoice in the exaltation of Christ. Let's pray.