

PHILIPPIANS

**The Letter of Paul
to the Church in
Philippi**



Introduction

Felix, the Roman governor of Palestine who was responsible for Paul's imprisonment at Caesarea, kept putting off giving Paul a proper trial. He was waiting for a bribe (Acts 24:26). Luke writes: 'After two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus; and since he wanted to grant the Jews a favour, Felix left Paul in prison' (Acts 24:27). Festus was also keen to make a favourable impression by organising that the trial take place in Jerusalem. Paul objected, demanding that he have a proper trial as a Roman citizen (Acts 25:9-11). It suited Festus to have him transferred to Rome.



Luke gives a graphic account of the sea voyage (Acts 27). They spent the winter of 59-60 in Malta (Acts 28:1,11), and in the spring continued on to Sicily and then to Puteoli in the gulf of Naples, the main port on the west coast of Italy. Paul stayed in Puteoli for a week before continuing the journey to Rome. Luke concludes the *Acts* with the following note:

Paul lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

– Acts 28:30-31



Introduction

Paul writes the letter to the Philippians from prison (see 1:13). Marcion (c.150AD) states that the imprisonment took place in Rome, and this was taken for granted till the nineteenth century. For the past two hundred years, however, scholars have continued to differ in their suggestions as to the most likely place from which Paul composed this letter. This is because, as with Paul's other letters from prison (Philemon, Colossians and Ephesians), there is insufficient evidence to resolve the debate. Paul says that he hopes to visit Philippi soon (2:24). This seems to rule out Caesarea as by 57AD he had discerned that his mission in the East had come to an end. His sights were on Rome and Spain, not on returning to Philippi.

Some suggest that Paul wrote this letter while in Ephesus, between 52 and 55AD. However, Rome cannot be ruled out and I see no reason for moving away from the traditional view that Paul composed Philippians during his Roman imprisonment some time between 60 and 62AD. If this is the case, his intention to visit Philippi indicates a change from his earlier plans which were to commence a mission in the west in Spain. He spoke of this desire while in Corinth in early 57AD (see Romans 15:24,28). It is important to remember that when he spoke of Spain in his Letter to the Romans he was not expecting to languish in Caesarea for two years and to have to spend further time in Rome awaiting trial. Any number of other reasons could have intervened to make him reconsider. I suggest that it was in this situation of something like house arrest, while waiting for his accusers to present their case, that Paul composed this letter to the Christians of Philippi. As the accompanying map indicates, communication between Rome and Philippi was quite direct.

Paul's first visit to Philippi was in 50AD. Philippi had been reconstructed by Philip of Macedonia, the father of Alexander the Great, in 356BC. It held a strategically important position, guarding a mountain pass on the overland trade route between Europe and Asia. In 168BC it was incorporated into the Roman Empire. In 42BC it was the scene of the victory of Antony and Octavian (who was to become the emperor Augustus) over Brutus and Cassius, and was established as a Roman colony where members of the victorious army could retire with all the rights of Roman citizens. It was a Roman city with Latin as the official language. There were some Jews there, but not enough it seems for a synagogue. Luke tells us of Paul's meeting with Lydia and some other women, and of her baptism (Acts 16:13-15). He also tells us of Paul's healing of a slave girl with a spirit of divination, of a riot, of Paul's being flogged and imprisoned, and of the conversion of the gaoler and his household (see Acts 16:16-34). Paul himself speaks of the shameful treatment which he received while in Philippi (1Thessalonians 2:2; Acts 16:11-40).

Paul visited Philippi again when he left Ephesus in 55AD (Acts 20:2). He may have composed Second Corinthians there. He may also have spent the winter of 55-56 there. He paid them a third visit in the spring of 57AD on his way from Corinth to Jerusalem (Acts 20:6). This letter witnesses to a special relationship of mutual affection that existed between these first converts in Europe and the missionary who brought the gospel to them. Paul's relative isolation in prison may help to explain the special depth of feeling in this letter in which Paul is responding to the thoughtfulness of a community that is very dear to his heart.



The Structure of Philippians

Introduction : Paul speaks of his deep affection for the Philippians.	1:1-11
Part One: His communion with Christ in prison.	1:12-26
Part Two: Paul's advice to the Philippians:	
a: The privilege of suffering.	1:27-30
b: The importance of being humble like Christ, if they are to preserve unity in the community.	2:1-11
c: They have a mission to the world, and so must listen obediently to God.	2:12-18
Part Three: News concerning Timothy and Epaphroditus.	2:19-30
Part Four: Salvation comes through union with Christ, not through the law.	3:1-21
Part Five: Final advice and expressions of affection and thanks	4:1-20
Conclusion	4:21-23

The liturgical readings

	1:1-11	30th Friday of Ordinary Time Year II
1:4-6,8-11		2nd Sunday of Advent Year C
	1:12-17,28-30	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
	1:18-26	30th Saturday of Ordinary Time Year II
1:20-24,27		25th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
2:1-11		26th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
	2:1-4	31st Monday of Ordinary Time Year II
	2:5-11	31st Tuesday of Ordinary Time Year II
2:6-11		Passion (Palm) Sunday
	2:12-18	31st Wednesday of Ordinary Time Year II
	2:19-30	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
	3:1-2	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
	3:3-8	31st Thursday of Ordinary Time Year II
3:8-14		5th Sunday of Lent Year C
	3:15-16	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
3:17 - 4:1		2nd Sunday of Lent Year C and 31st Friday of Ordinary Time Year II
	4:2-3	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary
4:4-7		3rd Sunday of Advent Year C
4:6-9		27th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
	4:10-19	31st Saturday of Ordinary Time Year II
4:12-14,19-20		28th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year A
	4:21-23	not in the Sunday or weekday lectionary

¹Paul and Timothy, slaves (NRSV 'servants') of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.

²Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul uses his Roman family name, as in all his correspondence (see page 11). Though he is the author of the letter, and though it is of an especially personal nature, he is still conscious of writing out of a faith and a commitment that is shared with others, and significantly with Timothy who was with Paul on his first visit to Philippi and who is well known to the community there (see 2:22). He includes Timothy, therefore, in the address. Though his letter does include some advice, he feels no need to accent his apostolic commission. It is more in the nature of a personal letter to a community with whom he has a special bond of affection.

He speaks of himself and Timothy as 'slaves (Greek: *doulos*) of Christ Jesus'. This is how he described himself to the Galatians (Galatians 1:10), and how he introduced himself to the Romans (Romans 1:1). In his letter to Colossae he spoke of both Epaphras (Colossians 1:7; 4:12) and Tychicus (Colossians 4:7) as his 'fellow slaves'. At one level it is a way of speaking of Jesus as their 'Lord'. At another level it expresses an intimate communion in obedience and in suffering with Christ, the suffering Servant (*doulos*) of the Lord (see the commentary on Galatians 1:10).

He addresses the Philippians as 'saints in Christ Jesus'. We are reminded of his address 'to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours' (1Corinthians 1:2). We reflected on the rich significance of the expression 'in Christ Jesus' when commenting on Romans 8:1-2. Through the gift of his Spirit, Christ is dwelling among the Philippians as in a temple, transforming them by sharing with them his intimate communion with the all-holy God.

Unique in this address is the mention of bishops and deacons. It is clear that the 'bishops' (Greek: *episkopos*, 'overseer', 'supervisor', see Acts 20:28) exercise a leadership role in the community, though Paul tells us nothing of what functions they carried out. He makes a special point of highlighting those in the community whom Christ has gifted to carry out various ministries (Greek: *diakonos*; see commentary on 1Corinthians 3:5). It is important, however, to note that Paul addresses the letter to the community which has been gifted with the various ministries, including those who exercise leadership. The letter is not addressed directly to the leaders.

Paul's greeting in verse two is identical with his greeting to the Galatians. For a reflection on the significance of the various terms and titles used in it see the commentary on Galatians 1:3.

As in almost all his letters, Paul follows the address with an expression of thanks. In doing so he is following the practice current in his day. His expression of thanks (Greek: *eucharisteō*) here is of an unusual intensity and affection. Note the constant repetition of the word 'all' in verses three and four. Verse three immediately presents us with a difficulty in translation. The Greek is ambiguous, as it uses a simple genitive to link 'remembrance' and 'your'. The NRSV has taken it as a temporal phrase telling us about Paul's remembrance of the Philippians. Others suggest that Paul is describing the first reason for his thanks, which is because of their remembrance of him, which includes the gift which they have just sent to him (see 4:18). There is clearly a special relationship between him and this community, and Paul's heart is constantly thanking God for them and remembering them 'with joy'. The mood of this short letter is set by the word 'joy' which occurs no fewer than fourteen times.

He thanks God, secondly, for the active part they have been playing in sharing (Greek: *koinōnia*) his apostolic mission of promoting the gospel. Communion (*koinōnia*) will also be a central theme of the letter (see 3:10).

Thirdly, he is confident in thanking God who continues to draw them on to the goal of complete communion in Christ. The 'day of Jesus Christ' is the day, which Paul still thinks of as imminent (see 4:5), when history will have reached its goal, when the world will be judged by God, and when the risen Christ will come to gather his disciples to be with him (see the commentary on 1Thessalonians 2:19). Paul is confident that God will have brought them to perfection by that day. The theme of confident assurance is also repeated throughout the letter.

³I thank my God every time I remember you,

[or 'for all the times you remember me']

⁴constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you,

⁵because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.

⁶I 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.

7It is right for me to think [and feel] this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel.

8For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

We have had occasion in earlier letters to note the very tender way in which Paul expresses his affection for those among whom he has lived and worked. Recall his words to the Galatians:

My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of child-birth until Christ is formed in you.

– Galatians 4:19

Recall also his words to the Christians of Thessalonica:

We were gentle among you, like a mother tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

– 1Thessalonians 2:7-8

Paul knows how deeply the Philippians love him. Clearly the love is mutual. He speaks of his feelings for them as being 'right' (Greek: *dikaios*), for they are according to the will of God. He repeats what he has just said in verses three to five concerning their affection for him, and the way they share in his mission of defending and promoting the gospel, including his present imprisonment which he looks upon as part of his mission.

Verse eight witnesses not only to the depth of Paul's feeling for the Philippians but also to the depths of his communion with Christ. He said to the Galatians: 'it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me' (Galatians 2:20). He recognises the depth of feeling (*splagchna*) which he experiences for them as his sharing in the love that moved the heart of Jesus. This deeply felt love was characteristic of Jesus. The same word used by Paul is used by the writers of the gospels to describe how Jesus was profoundly moved (Greek: *splagchnizomai*) by the leper (Mark 1:41), by the blind men (Matthew 20:24), by the widow whose only son had died (Luke 7:13), and by the harassed and dejected crowd (Mark 6:34; 8:2). Jesus spoke in the same terms of the reaction of the Good Samaritan to the man whom he found by the wayside (Luke 10:33), and of the father when he welcomed home his wandering and wayward son (Luke 15:20). The 'spiritual life' – that is to say, the life of the Spirit – is meant to affect our whole being, transforming our feelings and emotions as well as our thoughts and decisions.

Using one of his favourite words, ‘overflow’ (Greek: *perisseuō*), Paul prays that their ‘love may overflow more and more’. Though the English translation varies, Paul uses the same verb when he prays: ‘may the Lord make you increase and *abound* in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you’ (1 Thessalonians 3:12). Likewise, when he writes to the Corinthians: ‘God is able to *provide* you with every blessing *in abundance*, so that by always having enough of everything, you may *share abundantly* in every good work’ (2 Corinthians 9:8). To the Ephesians he speaks of ‘the riches of his grace that God *lavished* on us’ (Ephesians 1:8).

Here it is their ‘love’ that he wants to ‘overflow more and more’. For a fuller reflection on love see the commentary on Galatians 5:6. He is referring to the communion of the risen Christ with his Father. To love another person in the sense in which Paul uses the word here includes the way in which we see others in the light of the gospel, and the way in which we decide, on the basis of this recognition, to give our lives for others as Christ gave his life for us. Love, therefore, requires ‘knowledge’ – significantly, knowledge of what God has revealed in Christ. It requires ‘full insight’, for it is about judgment and decision as to how best to give oneself in love to others, according to one’s grace, according to the other’s need, and in sensitive obedience to the inspiration of Christ’s Spirit living in us.

This kind of loving will keep us ‘pure’, not by virtue of our own efforts, but because it is the love of Christ’s Spirit in us. This love will fill us [Greek: *pleroō*] with the fruits which come ‘through Jesus Christ’. We think of Paul’s words to the Ephesians about the church being the body of Christ, ‘the fullness of him who fills all in all’ (Ephesians 1:23), and his prayer that they ‘be filled with all the fullness of God’ (Ephesians 3:19). He assures the Colossians: ‘you have come to fullness in him’ (Colossians 2:10). The fullness of the fruits of which Paul is speaking to the Philippians include the fruits of the Spirit named by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23, the fruits of the righteousness which is God’s gift (Galatians 2:15-21), and which leads to the ‘glory and praise of God’. These fruits can come only from grace (see 2:13). ‘For the glory and praise of God’ reminds us of the refrain in Ephesians 1:6,12,14.

⁹And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight

¹⁰to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless,

¹¹having been filled with [NRSV ‘produced’] the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

The gospel proclaimed

¹²I want you to know, brothers and sisters [NRSV 'beloved'] that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel,

¹³so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for [or 'in'] Christ;

¹⁴and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.

¹⁵Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill.

¹⁶These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defence of the gospel;

¹⁷the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment.

¹⁸What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice.

To the Romans Paul writes: 'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God' (Romans 8:28). And to the Corinthians: 'While we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh' (2Corinthians 4:11). His beloved friends are concerned about his condition. He assures them that God has used his situation to advance the gospel. He speaks about the 'imperial guard' (Greek: *praitōrion*). This is a word borrowed from Latin where it was used for the praetorian guard in Rome. It was also used for the official residence of the governor in an imperial province. We have an example in the New Testament in Judea where the governor was in fact a military prefect (see Mark 15:16). However we have no evidence of its use in a senatorial province such as Asia. This is one more reason for favouring Rome, rather than Ephesus, as the place from which Paul is writing.

Paul's imprisonment is 'for' (Greek: *en*) Christ. He is in prison because of his carrying out the commission given him by Christ. The Greek '*en*' could also carry the meaning that he is sharing in the sufferings of Christ, and that it is because he is 'in Christ' that he is able to bear his imprisonment. The confidence this engenders in the rest of the Christian community is also described as being 'in the Lord'.

Not everyone is well disposed to Paul. Some are happy to see him in prison and perhaps interpret this as a sign of God's displeasure. However, in spite of their 'envy', 'rivalry' and 'selfish ambition', they are proclaiming Christ, and for Paul that is all that matters. Their feelings towards him are a secondary matter. That he even mentions this rivalry is an indication of the special relationship which he has with the Philippians to whom he feels free to speak about his personal hurts.

The only thing that Paul wants for himself is to be with Christ. Since this means sharing in the intimate love-communion which Christ has with the Father, Paul knows that there is no limit to the depth of communion possible for him. He does not want his beloved friends to be worried about him, but he does want them to surround him with their prayers and to hold him up to God that he might be more and more open to the gift of the 'Spirit of Jesus Christ' who is constantly inviting him into closer communion. He is confident in 'deliverance' (Greek: *sōtēria*) - not in deliverance from prison (though he thinks that will happen, too), but in ultimate 'salvation' (see 1:28). Like Job, he can say:

I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God.

– Job 19:25-26

His 'eager expectation and hope' is that he will remain faithful to the commission given to him. Then, whether he lives or dies is irrelevant, so long as people come to know Christ's love through him and welcome the salvation which Christ is offering them. As he said to the Romans: 'I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith' (Romans 1:16). Life in union with Christ now means a share in Christ's life of self-giving. It means communion with Christ crucified (compare 1Thessalonians 3:3-4). Paul reassures the Thessalonians that, since Jesus has died, death is not a reason for their losing hope in the promise of the gospel (1Thessalonians 4:13-18). He goes on to express his conviction:

God has destined us ... for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.

– 1Thessalonians 5:9-10

At that time he himself expected to be still alive at the coming of Christ. Now, some years later, he is contemplating the possibility of dying. His own assessment, however, is that he is still needed here for 'your progress and joy in the faith', and so he expects to be released and to be able to visit them again.

¹⁹**Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.**

²⁰**It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.**

²¹**For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.**

²²**If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which I prefer.**

²³**I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better;**

²⁴**but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.**

²⁵**Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith,**

²⁶**so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.**

²⁷Only, live as citizens [NRSV 'live your life'] in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ,

so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one Spirit [NRSV 'spirit'], striving side by side with one soul [NRSV 'mind'] for the faith of the gospel,

²⁸and are in no way intimidated by your opponents.

For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation.

And this is God's doing.

²⁹For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well

³⁰since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

We have here a privileged insight into what Paul chooses to stress when writing to a community with whom he shares a deep mutual love. The one thing he urges is that they live in a way that is worthy of the gospel of Christ. He will bring out certain aspects of what this means in the section which begins here and goes to verse eighteen of the following chapter. The Philippians were understandably proud of being citizens of a Roman colony – which is picked up by Paul in using the word *politeuomai*. The 'gospel of Christ' is the good news about God which Jesus revealed in word and especially in his manner of life. It is also the good news about Jesus: about his communion with God which not even death could break; and about his longing to share this same communion with us.

Like Paul, they are meeting opposition. They will need to 'stand firm in one Spirit'. Paul is referring to the spirit that binds them together as a community in Christ, the Spirit of the risen Christ. To do this they will need to 'strive side by side' (*sunaltheō*; from which derives the English 'athletics'). Their communion and unity is not a superficial one, but is 'in one soul' (*psuchē*). We recall Luke's description of the first Christian community in Jerusalem: 'the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul' (Acts 4:32).

Paul has heard that there is trouble in Philippi. Verse thirty indicates that the Christians were experiencing a continuation of the opposition which he himself encountered when he was there (see Acts 16:19-24). By withdrawing from civic religious cult, Christians were seen by other citizens as neglecting the gods and so as endangering the city. They may also have been experiencing pressure to join the Jewish community, since Jews were protected under Roman law. In this way they could avoid trouble. Whatever the source of the pressure, Paul urges them to hold on to the faith which has its source in the gospel. The behaviour of their opponents shows that they are heading for destruction. The steadfast faith of the Christian community is a sure sign that they are on the way of salvation. We reflected on the nation of 'destruction' when commenting on 2Thessalonians 1:9, and on the notion of 'salvation' when commenting on Romans 8:24.

From his own experience Paul knows that they will need a lot of encouragement if they are going to ‘stand firm’. He knows, too, that they cannot succeed if they attempt to trust their own resources, and so he focuses their attention on God, the source of all encouragement. It is God who has granted them the grace (Greek: *charizomai*) of believing in Jesus. Paul assures them that their suffering, too, is a gift of their gracious God, for, like Paul and with Paul, they have been given the privilege of being in communion with Jesus in his suffering. If they keep loving in such difficult circumstances, they will also share the consolation of Jesus’ Spirit sustaining them in their communion of love with God. For a reflection on Paul’s thoughts concerning joy in suffering, see the commentary on 1Thessalonians 1:6. We recall the words of Jesus:

I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world — therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘Servants are not greater than their master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also. But they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me.

– John 15:17-21

Paul will call those who are opposing the gospel ‘enemies of the cross of Christ’(3:18). They do not understand the power of love that holds on through suffering. The Christian is not asked to seek suffering, any more than Christ sought it. But if we are obedient to God’s will and suffering comes our way we are asked not to stop believing or loving because of it, but to hold on to our faith, and to remain loving, as Christ did. Such love is redemptive. While we work against the injustices that cause so much suffering, let us unite our pain to that of Jesus on the cross, that we may share his faith, his hope and his love. Embracing him in his sufferings, we will experience the joy of being embraced by him.

Paul used imagery from the Greek contests earlier when he spoke of them ‘striving side by side’(*sunathleō*). He continues the same imagery here with the word ‘struggle’(*agōna*, compare 1Corinthians 9:25; Colossians 1:29, 2:1, 4:12).

**‘If then there is
any appeal
[NRSV ‘encour-
agement’]
in Christ,
any consolation
from love,
any communion
[NRSV ‘sharing’]
in the Spirit,
any movements
of compassion
[NRSV ‘compas-
sion’]
and feelings
of love [NRSV
‘sympathy’]**

On a number of occasions, especially in this letter and in Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians, we have had occasion to observe Paul’s affectionate nature and his capacity for deep friendship. His close communion with the risen Jesus also stands out in everything he writes. Rarely do these two aspects of Paul’s character come together as beautifully as in this passage. He has spoken of the need to support each other in the faith in the face of opposition coming from outside the community. Now he appeals to the Christians in Philippi to do all they can to deepen communion within the community.

He begins his appeal by speaking of four aspects of the life which they enjoy as disciples of Jesus. The first is the way in which Christ himself continues to appeal to them to live a life of love. The Greek *paraklēsis* has many nuances, including encouragement and comfort. It often means appeal and that seems to suit the present context best (see the reflection on 1Thessalonians 2:12 and 2Corinthians 1:3). Jesus ‘gave himself’(Galatians 1:4) for us, and from the heart of the risen Christ comes the Spirit through whom ‘God’s love is poured into our hearts’(Romans 5:5). Jesus gives us his Spirit so that we might enjoy his own communion with God and so with each other. He continues to *appeal* to us to live in the communion of love for which he gave his life.

Paul speaks, secondly, of the consolation (Greek: *paramuthion*) that comes with love. He is referring to God’s love which they continue to receive from Christ in any number of unexpected ways. One way is through the gift of the Spirit who speaks through those who have the charism of prophecy (see 1Corinthians 14:3). He is thinking especially of the comfort which they receive from Christ through the love of other Christians. We recall Paul’s appeal to the Thessalonians to ‘comfort those who are discouraged’(1Thessalonians 5:14).

Thirdly, he speaks of the communion (*koinōnia*) which they enjoy ‘in the Spirit’(see 2Corinthians 13:13): communion with the risen Christ and so with the Father; and communion with those who share their faith. Finally, he speaks of movements of ‘compassion’(plural of *splagchnon*; see 1:8) which they have experienced and ‘feelings of love’(plural of *oiktirmos*; see the reflection on 2Corinthians 1:3). He is referring to ‘the mercies of God’(Romans 12:1), and the compassion and love of the heart of Jesus, especially as these are mediated to us through other members of the Christian community.

Paul is appealing to the example of Jesus, to their communion with the risen Christ through their sharing in his Spirit, and to the closeness of their relationship with Paul himself, to encourage the Philippians to live together in unselfish and humble communion. He speaks again of 'joy' (see 1:4,18,25), and assures them that their unity in Christ would make his joy complete. He urges them to 'be of the same mind' (*phroneō*): to be in tune with each other in their thinking, feelings and attitudes. He wants them to experience 'the same love': the love of the heart of Jesus drawing them into ever more intimate communion with God and with each other. He wants to see them 'in full accord' (*sumpsuchos*, 'sharing the same soul', see 1:27). This is what it means to 'live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' (1:27).

Christ is living in him and in the Christians of Philippi. Paul wants them to let this special trusting dependence of Christ on his Father find expression in their lives too. Then they would not be tempted to self-centredness or to striving after and finding their worth in things that are valueless (*kenodoxia*). The only glory (*doxa*) worth having is a sharing in the glory of the risen Christ. Then they would have no difficulty in delighting in the gifts which Christ has bestowed on others, in looking up to them and caring for them. This is a theme stressed by Paul in his correspondence with the Corinthians: 'Do not seek your own advantage, but that of the other' (1Corinthians 10:24). He could say of himself: 'I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, so that they may be saved' (1Corinthians 10:33). One of the characteristics of true love is that 'it does not insist on its own way' (1Corinthians 13:5).

At the basis of such selfless love lies humility, which for a disciple of Christ has nothing to do with belittling self. It is the recognition of oneself as a child of God and includes the trust that one's true self will be cared for by God's love (see the commentary on Colossians 3:12 for an extended reflection on humility). This call to humility provides the setting for the following verses, for to see what humility is we need to contemplate Jesus.

²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one soul [NRSV 'in full accord'] and of one mind.

³Do nothing from selfish ambition. Do not strive after or seek to find your value in things that are worthless

[NRSV 'conceit']

but in humility regard others above [NRSV 'as better than'] yourselves,

so that not everyone is focused on him/herself, but each is looking to the interests of the others.

[NRSV 'Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others']

**⁵Let the same mind
be in you that was in
Christ Jesus,**

**⁶who, being [NRSV
'though he was'] in
the form of God, did
not regard equality
with God as some-
thing to be grasped
[NRSV 'exploited']**

**⁷but emptied himself
taking the form of a
slave being born in
human likeness.**

**And being found in
human form,**

**⁸he humbled himself
and became obedient
to the point of death
— even death on a
cross.**

**⁹Therefore God also
highly exalted him
and gave him the
name that is above
every name,**

**¹⁰so that at the name
of Jesus every knee
should bend, in heav-
en and on earth and
under the earth,**

**¹¹and every tongue
should confess that
Jesus Christ is Lord, to
the glory of God the
Father.**

There is a rhythmic, hymn-like, quality about these verses. Whether Paul composed them himself or whether he is quoting from a pre-existing Christian text in praise of Christ, they beautifully express the humility which Paul wishes to encourage in the Christians of Philippi as well as a conviction of God's fidelity to love. He is not so much offering Jesus as an example to be followed, as pointing to Jesus and asking them to let Jesus live in them. Only in this way can we experience the humility that so characterised his life.

As we noted in relation to a similar rhythmic passage in Colossians 1:15-20, we must avoid the temptation to read the language of the heart as though it was the language of rational thought. We are being invited to be swept up into the wonder and praise which these verses express rather than to attempt to pin down their exact meaning to the complete satisfaction of our inquiring mind. This is not to say that these verses lack clarity. It is just that they cannot be comprehended within the limits of logic. They must be read in the spirit in which they were composed, with the recognition that we are dealing with the language of love.

The first three verses (2:6-8) speak of Jesus' humility in the lifestyle which he chose and in the extent to which he was willing to give himself for others, even when it involved undergoing the humiliating death of crucifixion. The second three verses (2:9-11) speak of the way in which God has exalted him. Paul has just been urging them to 'be of the same mind' (2:2). He now explains that the thinking, feelings and attitudes to which he is referring are those of Christ.

He begins by speaking of Christ as 'being in the form (Greek: *morphē*) of God'. The Greek uses a participle and it is important to observe that the 'though' in the NRSV has been supplied by the translators. He then introduces the concept of 'equality with God'. For Paul the monotheist 'there is one God, the Father' (1 Corinthians 8:6). No one and nothing can be equal to God. The concept occurs in only one other place in the New Testament, where Jesus' opponents accuse him of 'making himself *equal to God*' (John 5:18). This Jesus denies, asserting his complete dependence on God, his Father: 'the Son can do nothing on his own' (John 5:19).

Paul goes on to say that Jesus did not regard equality with God as *harpagmos*. Some translators (including those responsible for the NRSV) interpret Paul as saying that Christ did not consider being equal with God as ‘something to be exploited’. They see in verse six a reference to a pre-existent Christ who chose to become human rather than use his divinity for his own advantage. Though *harpagmos* is not found in any other text in the Greek Bible, the related verb *harpazō* is found in both the Septuagint and the New Testament, and always with the idea of grasping something forcibly. If we interpret *harpagmos* along these lines, Paul is contemplating Jesus as humbly accepting the reality of the human condition and living in complete dependence on the Father. This fits in with the response Jesus gave in the text from John’s Gospel which we noted on the previous page.

In light of Paul’s portraying of Jesus as a new Adam (see 1 Corinthians 15:45-47; Romans 5:18-19), he may also be saying that, whereas Adam grasped at the forbidden fruit in his desire to be ‘like God’ (see Genesis 3:5), Jesus remained faithful and obedient. He accepted to depend on God in loving trust: ‘the Son can do nothing on his own’ (John 5:19). In this way he showed us what it means to be human (‘Adam’). I will follow this line of interpretation, while remaining open to further more mysterious levels of contemplation which the evocative language may open up.

If this is the direction of Paul’s thought, what does he mean by the expression ‘being in the form (*morphē*) of God’? The thought seems to be the same as that expressed in John’s Gospel when Philip says to Jesus: ‘Show us the Father and we shall be satisfied’, and Jesus replies: ‘Whoever has seen me has seen the Father’ (John 14: 8-9). A being can be manifest in a number of different forms. When the forms change we borrow the Greek word used here by Paul and speak of a ‘*metamorphosis*’. Paul is reminding us that when we look at Jesus we are seeing how God chose to reveal himself in human form. It is precisely because of this fact (and not in spite of it, as the word ‘though’ implies) that Jesus chose to live and to die in the manner which Paul goes on to describe.

Paul is speaking of Jesus in this way to remind us of what we are all called to be. By communion with Jesus we are called to undergo a transformation till we can say with Paul: ‘it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me’ (Galatians 2:20). He goes on to say: ‘My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed (*morphō*) in you’ (Galatians 4:19). We are to be ‘transformed’ (*metamorphō*) by a ‘renewal of mind’ (Romans 12:2). As Paul says to the Corinthians:

All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed (*metamorphō*) into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

– 2 Corinthians 3:18

[repeated from the previous page]

⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, being in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped

⁷but emptied himself taking the form of a slave being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

⁸he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross.

Verse seven takes us to the paradox that is at the very core of Christianity, to what Paul calls the ‘mystery’ in his letters to the Colossians and Ephesians. Jesus is God’s self-revelation in human form, and the paradox is that when ‘being in the form (*morphē*) of God’ is expressed in human terms it means accepting ‘the form (*morphē*) of a slave’. Nothing previously revealed prepared us for this. Everyone in Paul’s world knew what it was like to be a slave. It meant that one’s very person was completely at the disposal of others. At the human level, what is amazing about Jesus is that this is the life which he freely chose. At the level of revelation – and this is central to what Paul is saying here – this choice, and the lifestyle and way of self-giving that go with it, is a revelation of God. God is revealed in Jesus as self-giving love. God’s glory is realised in the gift of self such that creatures, by their existing in love, radiate the very beauty of God.

Like all of us, Jesus had to live within the limits of the human condition. Paul expresses this here in terms of his being ‘born in human likeness’ (*homoioōma*). We are reminded of Paul’s statement in his letter to the Romans where he speaks of God sending his Son ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’ (Romans 8:3). ‘Likeness’, because, though his flesh is the same, he was unique in that he did not sin. Similarly here, though his ‘human form’ is the same of ours, his uniqueness is in being the one in whom ‘the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily’ (Colossians 2:9).

Paul describes Jesus’ choice in ‘taking the form of a slave’ as a self-emptying (*kenoō*). Jesus ‘gave himself’ (Galatians 1:4) for us. Paul writes to the Corinthians of ‘the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor’ (2Corinthians 8:9). He poured out his life in obedient service of his Father, and he spent himself in the service of others. His self-giving brought him to the giving of his life, even to dying the death of a slave: death by crucifixion.

Granted the context, Paul speaks of Jesus’ choice also in terms of humility (see 2:3). In giving himself in love the way he did he was giving expression to his complete trust in his Father’s love and to his conviction that self-giving is the way in which we express what it is to be created in the image and likeness of God (see Genesis 1:26).

Having contemplated Jesus in the humility of his self-giving love, Paul goes on to contemplate the fidelity of God. We found a similar movement from humble service to glory in the introduction to the letter to the Romans where Paul speaks of ‘the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord’ (Romans 1:3-4). Likewise, the hymn-like passage in Colossians which sings of the exaltation of Christ speaks also of ‘the blood of his cross’ (Colossians 1:20).

There are echoes here of the song of the suffering servant (‘slave’) of the Lord (Isaiah 52:13 - 53:12; see the reflections on this theme in the commentary on Galatians 1:10). He, too, ‘poured out himself to death’ (Isaiah 53:12); and he, too, was ‘exalted’ (Isaiah 52:13).

Again and again, Isaiah speaks of the unique glory of the God of Israel: ‘I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other’ (Isaiah 42:8). ‘There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Saviour; there is no one besides me. Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other ... To me every knee shall bend, every tongue shall swear’ (Isaiah 45:21-23). To call upon God as ‘Lord’ is to relate to God as Saviour. In giving to the exalted Christ the name ‘Lord’ (see Galatians 1:3; 1Corinthians 12:3; Romans 10:9), God is telling us that he shares his glory with his Son, and that we are to call upon him and be saved. We recall Paul’s words in his letter to the Ephesians:

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come.

– Ephesians 1:20-21

⁹Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name,

¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

¹¹and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

With Jesus' humility

The exalted Jesus lives in the fullness of divine communion. Enjoying the intimacy of the love of his Father in the communion of the Holy Spirit, Jesus shares to the full in the glory of God. He is the Lord to whom God has entrusted his power to redeem and to save. As we call upon him, Paul wants us to remember the way in which the 'lordship' of God is expressed in human terms, and it is with this in mind that he presents this portrait of the humble Jesus. He is appealing to us to live the life of Christ, to realise that everything we have is gift and to use all our gifts in humble service of others. He is appealing to us to give our lives for others as Christ did.

We are called to 'serve (as slaves, *douleuō*) a living and true God' (1Thessalonians 1:9). 'Through love', we are to 'become slaves to one another' (Galatians 5:13). In the future, we shall share Jesus' glory (see 1Thessalonians 4:14), but the path to glory is the same path as that taken by Jesus himself. This is why Paul can write:

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

– Galatians 6:14

Luke gives us the following reflection on the way in which Jesus exercised his 'lordship'. The scene is the last supper:

A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. But he said to them, 'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.'

– Luke 22:24-27

A powerful example of such service is given us in John's account of the supper:

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off [*laid aside*] his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him ... [He said] You call me Teacher and Lord — and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.

– John 13:3-5,13-14

Jesus *laid aside* what was his own and took on the appearance and the task of a slave that he might serve his brothers and sisters. In this final gesture, he gave expression to his own understanding of his life and of the life-giving which he was about to make. This is the meaning of the broken bread and the poured-out wine. We are at the heart here of our understanding of God and of the essence of the human condition as being in the image and likeness of God. It is in his humble service that Jesus reveals what it is to be divine and what it is to be human.

Conscious of the commission given to him to proclaim the gospel, Paul sees their obedience to him as being obedience to God. We note the same conviction in his correspondence with the Thessalonians in which he stresses the importance of ‘obeying the gospel of our Lord Jesus’ (2Thessalonians 1:8), while insisting on their ‘obeying what we say in this letter’ (2Thessalonians 3:14). He has just been contemplating Jesus who ‘became obedient to the point of death’ (2:8). It is this obedience that he urges on the Philippians. He wants them to recognise their complete dependence on God. He wants them to allow the Spirit of God to penetrate their minds and hearts so that they might hear and heed God’s call.

Paul hopes to come to them soon, but their Christian life does not depend on his being among them. God is at work in them, so they should live in ‘fear and trembling’; that is to say, with a profound reverence before the mystery and power of God’s presence and activity in their midst. We reflected on the significance of ‘fear of the Lord’ when commenting on 2Corinthians 5:11. We should respond with reverence to the direction which God gives us, for it is God who is working in us (Greek: *energeō*), giving us the energy to make and to carry out the decisions that are needed to deliver us from whatever it is that is inhibiting our obedience to the gospel, and to live to the full the life of a disciple of Jesus. It is God who is leading us to the salvation which is the fulfilment of God’s design for us. We are reminded of Paul’s prayer of praise ‘to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine’ (Ephesians 2:30).

He goes on to urge them not to fall into the sin of those whom God freed from the slavery of Egypt and led through the wilderness to the Promised Land. Faced with the difficulties of the journey, they failed to trust God and indulged in ‘murmuring’ against God (see Exodus 16:7-12). Of them it is said: ‘his degenerate (*momētos*) children have dealt falsely with him, a crooked and perverse generation’ (Deuteronomy 32:5). Paul borrows these words to describe the Gentile world in which the Christian Philippians have to live. As disciples of Jesus, by contrast, they are to continue to trust their Father, and as God’s children, be ‘blameless’, ‘innocent’ and ‘without blemish (*amōmos*)’.

¹²Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling;

¹³for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

¹⁴Do all things without murmuring and arguing,

¹⁵so that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish, in the midst of ‘a crooked and perverse generation’
(Deuteronomy 32:5)

[A crooked and perverse generation]

in which you shine like stars in the world.

¹⁶It is by your holding fast to the word of life that I can boast on the day of Christ that I did not run in vain or labour in vain.

¹⁷But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith,

I am glad and rejoice with you all

¹⁸and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.

It is through the trust which they place in God in obeying God's inspiration and living as true disciples of Jesus that the Christians of Philippi will be what Jesus himself urged us to be:

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

– Matthew 5:14-16

We recall Paul's challenge to the Gentile churches of the east: 'Once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light. Live as children of light' (Ephesians 5:8). In the light of Paul's speaking of Jesus as the 'servant of the Lord', it is interesting to see how often the image of light occurs in the songs of the servant in the Book of Isaiah:

I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

– Isaiah 42:6-7

I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.

– Isaiah 49:6

In the Book of Daniel, too, we read:

Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.

– Daniel 12:3

Ever the missionary, Paul will rejoice 'on the day of Christ' (see 1:6,10), that his apostolic work has born fruit in that the world has been attracted to Jesus by the life of the Christians in Philippi. For the third time he speaks of his mission in terms taken from the athletic stadium: he does not want to 'run in vain' (see 1:27,30).

Paul likens their faith to a sacrifice that is being offered up to God. To the Romans he wrote of 'the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit' (Romans 15:16). They are concerned about his condition in prison, so Paul adds that even if his life is poured out like oil poured over the sacrifice, his heart is full of a joy that he wants them to share.

Paul's isolation is another indication that it is unlikely that he is writing from Ephesus, especially when we compare this with Philemon and Colossians. He has already spoken of those who are 'proclaiming Christ from envy and rivalry' and from 'selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment'(1:15,17). Apart from Timothy, they are 'seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ'.

Timothy, on the other hand, is portrayed as exemplifying the qualities which Paul has been urging on the Philippians. He speaks of Timothy as 'like-souled'(Greek: *isopsuchos*). He shares Paul's concern for the Philippians and is like a son to Paul (compare 1Corinthians 4:17). Christ took 'the form of a slave'(*doulos*)(2:7). Timothy and Paul 'serve'(*douleuo* 'serve-as-a-slave') together in the work of the gospel.

Everything that Paul does is done 'in Christ'. Notice that the hope which he has of sending Timothy to Philippi is 'in the Lord Jesus', as is his trust that he himself will be able to visit them soon. All Paul's plans are subject to God's will. We recall his words to the Corinthians: 'I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills'(1Corinthians 4:19); 'I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits'(1Corinthians 16:7).

Paul is careful to avoid giving the impression that he does not appreciate their thoughtfulness in sending Epaphroditus to him (see 4:18). He is sending him back earlier than they would have expected, but he explains why in a way that demonstrates his respect for Epaphroditus and his deep affection and concern for the Philippians. He calls Epaphroditus their 'messenger'(*apostolos*, 'apostle'), because he was sent (*apostello*) to Paul by the community (compare 2Corinthians 8:23). He calls him their 'minister'(*leitourgos*), because he was carrying out a service on behalf of the community. Like Christ (and like Paul and Timothy), Epaphroditus was willing to give his life in a mission of love.

¹⁹I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I may be cheered by news of you.

²⁰I have no one like-souled [NRSV 'like him'] who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. ²¹All of them are seeking their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.

²²But Timothy's worth you know, how like a son with a father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. ²³I hope therefore to send him as soon as I see how things go with me;

²⁴and I trust in the Lord that I will also come soon.

²⁵Still, I think it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus — my brother and co-worker and fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need;

²⁶for he has been longing for all of you, and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill.

²⁷He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another.

²⁸I am the more eager to send him, therefore, in order that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious.

²⁹Welcome him then in the Lord with all joy, and honour such people, ³⁰because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to make up for those services that you could not give me.

¹And so [NRSV 'Finally'], my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord.

To write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, and for you it is a safeguard.

²Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!

For their life as a community and for their mission to the world, it is critically important that the Christians in Philippi remain united and that they 'rejoice in the Lord'. This brings Paul to stress something which he has often stressed in his visits to them (see 3:18). He judges that his insistence is important to safeguard their faith, so important that he mentions it again here. Paul's missionary work was constantly being opposed by a powerful group who, in Christ's name, kept insisting on the necessity of converts to Christianity being circumcised and faithfully observing the commands of God as revealed in the Jewish Torah.

While Paul has nothing but the highest respect for Judaism, and gratitude to God for the gift of the Law in which he himself was trained, he recognises the activity of this group of Jewish Christians as being destructive of the Christian community, for it fails to recognise the value of being a Gentile Christian, and it jeopardises the mission of the church by attempting to reduce Christianity to a Jewish sect. This is the group whom he described elsewhere as 'false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ'(2Corinthians 11:13).

These rival teachers refer to Gentiles, including Gentile Christians, as 'dogs', since they fail to observe the purity laws required by God of those whom God has set aside as his chosen people. They see themselves as workers for good, and they insist on circumcision. With heavy irony, Paul uses their term of derision against them. He is not criticising Jews, and he is not criticising Jewish Christians (of whom he is one). He is criticising those who insist that to be a Christian one must submit to the Torah. It is these false missionaries and not the Gentile Christians who are 'dogs', for it is they who are doing what Gentiles are accused of doing when they are termed 'dogs': they are rejecting the covenant and the promise. They are 'evil workers', for they are contradicting the will of God as revealed in Jesus. They say that they are insisting on 'circumcision', but what they are proposing is really only a form of physical mutilation.

To be truly ‘circumcised’, that is to say, to be part of the people who enjoy communion with God, the Gentile Christian converts in Philippi do not need to become Jews and submit to the Jewish law. What they need is to centre their lives ‘in Christ Jesus’, then they will ‘worship in the Spirit’ and ‘have no confidence in the flesh’. The circumcision that matters is something which they already have. As Paul wrote to the Romans:

You are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.

– Romans 8:8

Paul wants them to beware of those who boast in physical circumcision. He wants them, whether they are circumcised or not, to join him in declaring: ‘May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world’ (Galatians 6:14). As he said earlier in the letter: ‘For me living is Christ’ (1:21).

Paul reminds the Philippians that he can match any qualifications these people might use to support their authority. Not only is he circumcised and a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, but he belongs to a family of strict observance. Though born in Tarsus, his family were ‘Hebrews’, that is to say, they kept their links with the land of Israel and with its language. Luke tells us that they had Paul educated in Jerusalem under Gamaliel (see Acts 22:3; 26:4). Nor is it a matter only of what he inherited: ‘I have belonged to the strictest sect of our religion and lived as a Pharisee’ (Acts 26:5).

The sectarian Jewish Christians are insisting on the necessity of observing the law. Paul went further than that and in his zeal he persecuted the church (compare Galatians 1:13-14; 1Corinthians 15:9). So he knows what he is talking about when he warns the Philippians against their teaching. How many of these troublesome Jewish missionaries could claim to have lived their Jewish faith so faithfully that no one could find fault with them? We are reminded of the rich man who could say to Jesus that he had kept all the commandments since his youth. When Jesus looked at him in love and invited him to come with him, that man ‘went away grieving’ (Mark 10:22). Not so Paul!

³For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh —

⁴even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh. If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:

⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin,

a Hebrew born of Hebrews;

as to the law, a Pharisee;

⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church;

as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.

⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him,

not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ [or 'the faith of Christ'], the righteousness from God based on faith.

¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death,

¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Paul is warning his friends not to listen to these sectarian Christian missionaries. Paul had all the benefits which they are being promised if they accept circumcision, but ever since Jesus revealed himself to Paul and invited him to follow him and to be his missionary to the Gentiles, Paul has regarded every other so-called 'gain' as in fact a 'loss' in comparison.

All he wants now – and it is all he wants also for the Philippians – is to 'know Christ Jesus my Lord'. This is the kind of knowledge that comes only through communion in love. He spoke of it when he wrote to the Galatians about how they had 'come to know God, or rather to be known by God' (Galatians 4:9). Also when he said to the Corinthians: 'I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified' (1 Corinthians 2:2). This is not something that happens once and for all. The possibilities of communion with Christ are endless, and so Paul can write: 'Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1 Corinthians 13:12). He wants for himself and for the Philippians what he requests for all his Gentile converts: 'to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God' (Ephesians 3:19).

He once tried to secure a right relationship with God by perfect observance of the law (see 3:6). Now he knows that a right relationship with God is a relationship of communion in love. It cannot be earned. It is a gift graciously offered by God to be welcomed in faith. Jesus has this relationship, and it is Jesus who offers Paul and all who believe in him a share in this faith which opens them to share in Jesus' own love-communion with God. Paul knows this now and it is the only righteousness he wants for himself or for the Philippians. They must not let these other preachers play on their insecurity and trap them into seeking security in the law rather than in Jesus.

Paul's communion with Jesus is so intimate that he wants to identify with him in whatever way God graces him to do so. He said earlier that his imprisonment is 'for Christ' (1:13). This is why he can rejoice in it (1:18; see the commentary on 2 Corinthians 2:14). He wrote earlier of Jesus 'taking the form of a slave' and becoming 'obedient to the point of death – death on a cross' (2:7-8). He spoke, too, of the 'privilege of suffering for him' (1:29). Paul wants to become like Jesus (Greek: *summorphizō*) in his death, knowing that this is part of the transformation that has as its goal a sharing of Jesus' risen life (compare Romans 8:17).

Paul never loses sight of the fact that God is the one who initiates everything and who brings everything to its goal. Returning to the imagery of the stadium (see 1:17,30; 2:17), he sees himself as being attracted and sustained by grace as he runs his race. However, God has not yet brought him to the finishing line, and he has not yet been called to ascend the steps and receive the crown of victory. ‘Reached the goal’ translates the passive of the Greek *teleioō*. Though Paul frequently uses words cognate with *telos* (‘goal’), this is the only time he uses this verb. It happens that the only time it is used in Acts is in a speech by Paul at Miletus. He is about to journey to Jerusalem, whence he intends to go to Rome, and he is saying farewell to his friends in the east:

I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may *finish* my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God’s grace.

– Acts 20:24

Paul presses on joyfully in the confidence that ‘Christ Jesus has made me his own’. He is a prisoner ‘for Christ’ (1:13). He is also a prisoner *of* Christ, having been captivated by Jesus’ love.

The Philippians have come to know Christ, though some of them do not yet realise the depths of Jesus’ love for them or the extraordinary wonder of the goal towards which God is calling them. Paul is not worried by this, for he knows that God will continue to reveal himself and his will to them. However, they must not listen to the sectarian preachers, and they must resist any temptation to let go what they have already received through their entrance into the Christian community. ‘Hold fast’ translates the Greek *stoicheō*, a word drawn from the army where it means to ‘march in step’. Paul seems to be asking them not only to hold fast but to keep together. There is a special grace in their being united in the faith.

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal;

but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

¹³Brothers and sisters [NRSV ‘Beloved’], I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,

¹⁴I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

¹⁵Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you.

¹⁶Only let us hold fast to what we have attained.

**¹⁷Brothers and sisters,
join me in imitating
[NRSV 'join in imitat-
ing me'],**

**and observe those
who live according to
the example you have
in us.**

**¹⁸For many live as
enemies of the cross
of Christ; I have often
told you of them, and
now I tell you even
with tears.**

**¹⁹Their end is destruc-
tion; their god is the
belly; and their glory
is in their shame;
their minds are set on
earthly things.**

Perhaps Paul is asking the Philippians to join together in imitating him. If so, it is not the first time that he has offered himself as an example for his readers to follow (compare 1Thessalonians 1:6; 2Thessalonians 3:7,9), only so that they might learn to imitate Christ (compare 1Thessalonians 1:6). However the unusual *summimētēs mou* may mean 'be imitators [of Christ] *with me*' (rather than imitators '*of me*'). In either case the focus is on Jesus (see 2:6-11).

Paul weeps over the 'many who live as enemies of the cross of Christ'. He has already mentioned those in Rome who 'proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition' (1:17). There are also those in Philippi who insist on a circumcision which is merely a 'mutilation of the flesh' (3:2). In his correspondence with the Corinthians Paul stresses how hard it is to see God's wisdom in the folly of the cross and in weakness accepted and lived in love. It is hard to grasp and embrace true humility, but not to do so is to run the risk of using even Christianity for one's own security or advancement. The goal of such behaviour is not salvation but 'destruction' (see 1:28).

Paul's imagery indicates that he is still thinking especially of those who are fixated on observing Jewish food laws (their 'belly') and on physical circumcision (their 'shame'). They are 'enemies of the cross of Christ', for they are seeking through observance of the law to achieve what can only come through opening our hearts to the love given us by Jesus from the cross, and allowing his Spirit to bring about in us a whole new way of living: a sharing in the communion of love which is the very being of God. It is this communion which destroys sin, not our own efforts at being perfect according to the law.

The Philippians are proud citizens of a free city (see 1:27). Through their union with Jesus, they are citizens of heaven. Jesus' home is their home. They share Paul's eager longing for Jesus to come and take them to himself to share the eternal communion which we know as 'heaven'. We might reflect on other texts where Paul speaks of this eager waiting (Greek: *apekdechomai*):

For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness.

– Galatians 5:5

You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

– 1Corinthians 1:7

Not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

– Romans 8:23

Jesus is our 'Saviour', for 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved' (Romans 10:13). 'Christ is the head of the church, the body of which he is the Saviour' (Ephesians 5:23). It is he who has liberated us from 'a crooked and perverse generation' (2:15). He shares his life with us now and promises to continue to transform us so that we can share his glory.

There are close parallels between the language of verse twenty-one and that of Paul's 'hymn' in praise of Christ. He spoke there of Jesus being 'found in human form' (*schēma*, 2:7); here he speaks of our bodies being 'transformed' (*metaschēmatizō*). He spoke there of Jesus 'humbling himself' (*tapeinoō*, 2:8); here he speaks of 'the body of our humiliation' (*tapeinōsis*). He spoke there of Jesus 'taking the form' (*morphē*, 2:7) of a slave' and being exalted; he speaks here of our being 'conformed to the body of his glory' (*summorphos*). He said there that 'every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father' (2:11); here he speaks of 'the body of his glory', and of his making 'all things' subject to himself.

Paul is still spelling out what it means to 'live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' (1:27).

²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

²¹He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

²I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.

³Yes, and I ask you also, loyal Syzygos [NRSV 'my loyal companion], help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴Rejoice in the Lord, always; again I will say, rejoice.

⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

The Lord is near.

Paul sums up the advice he has been offering them ('Stand firm in the Lord') in terms of quite special affection. He loves them. He also longs to see them and to be with them. As he wrote earlier: 'God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus' (1:8). We have seen how 'joy' is a key theme of the letter. Now he calls the Philippians themselves his joy. Continuing the imagery of the stadium, he sees them also as his victory crown (Greek: *stephanos*, compare 1Thessalonians 2:19-20).

No community is entirely free of tensions. The fact that Paul names the two women and the fact that he asks a loyal companion, Syzygos (his name means 'one who shares a yoke') to help them mend their differences, indicates that whatever it is that has come between them is public knowledge, but also that they are already working to resolve it. This is an example of what he urged earlier: 'make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one soul and of one mind' (2:2). The 'same mind' which he wants for them is 'in the Lord'. Paul remembers with affection how Euodia and Syntyche struggled beside him (*sunathleō*, see 1:27). They will never be forgotten by God. We are reminded of Jesus' words: 'rejoice that your names are written in heaven' (Luke 10:20).

Once again Paul appeals to them to 'rejoice in the Lord'. He wants them to show everyone that special 'gentleness' (*epieikēs*) that was so characteristic of Jesus. We recall his appeal to the Corinthians by 'the meekness and gentleness of Christ' (2Corinthians 10:1). For a person who exercises power, this is the magnanimity of mind and heart that ensures that judgment is truthful rather than rigid. It is well translated 'clemency'. In everyday relations it ensures balance and equanimity. It is a most attractive virtue and Paul recognises its importance in the mission of the community to the world.

Paul reassures them that 'the Lord is near'. He may still be thinking of the coming of Christ as being imminent, but even independent of such an expectation, life is short. It will not be long before they are all enjoying the fullness of communion with Christ in the glory of the Father. In the meantime, the Lord is with them. As the Psalmist says; 'The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth' (Psalm 145:18).

Jesus told us: ‘Do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” ... your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things’ (Matthew 6:31-32). He encouraged us to pray, not to change God, but to keep our hearts fixed on God and to remain open to welcome the love that God is constantly pouring out over us. Jesus trusted that he would always receive from his Father, not necessarily what he wanted, but certainly what he needed. He believed this even when his cry of agony from the cross seemed to go unheard. Paul’s message is the same.

Paul links peace with thanksgiving also in his prayer for the Colossians: ‘Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful’ (Colossians 3:15). It is God’s own peace, the communion in love which is the very being of God, and which the risen Lord shares with us, that will guard our hearts and our minds from worry.

In verse eight Paul draws on the best of the moral education which the Gentile Philippians would have received through the Stoic teachers of the day, lived now by the Christians of Philippi ‘in Christ Jesus’. He wants them to continually ponder whatever is true (*alēthēs*): whatever is real, and not forgotten, obscured by lies and pretence. Paul cannot speak of ‘truth’ without thinking of the real God who is revealed in Jesus. He wants them to keep their attention fixed on whatever inspires a sense of God (*semnos*). Something is ‘just’ (*dikaïos*) when it is in accordance with the will of God. Something is ‘pure’ (*hagnos*) when it evokes a sense of the holy. He speaks of something that brings love out in us as *prospilēs*. Something is ‘commendable’ (*euphēmos*) when it does not give offence, but rather wins people over and evokes praise. Paul goes on to speak of the classic Greek word for virtue, namely, ‘excellence’ (*aretē*), and of all that will cause people to ‘see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven’ (Matthew 5:16).

They have learned these things through their Christian instruction. They have received them from the tradition, and from their own experience they have heard and seen them being lived by Paul. If they live in this way, they will experience in their lives the presence of the ‘God of peace’.

6Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

7And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8Finally brothers and sisters [NRSV ‘beloved'] whatever is true, whatever is inspiring of reverence [NRSV ‘honourable’],

whatever is just, whatever is pure,

whatever is attracting of love [NRSV ‘pleasing’],

whatever is commendable,

if there is any excellence

and if there is anything worthy of praise,

give consideration to [NRSV ‘think about’] these things.

9Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me,

and the God of peace will be with you.

Paul has learned to be content

¹⁰I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it.

¹¹Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.

¹²I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.

¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

¹⁴In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

Immediately after the address Paul mentioned how much he thanks God for the ways in which the Philippians are always thinking of him (see 1:3). He has also spoken of their sending Epaphroditus to minister to his needs (2:25), who ‘risked his life to make up for those services that you could not give me’ (2:30). As he draws his letter to a close he returns to the subject of their gift and thanks them again by saying how much joy it gave him to know that they were thinking of him. His joy is ‘in the Lord’ for it is the joy of the heart of Jesus that he is experiencing. As Jesus promised:

I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

– John 15:11

When Paul speaks of his ability to live a simple life, free from dependence on material possessions, he uses another technical word from the writings of the Greek moralists: the word ‘content’ (*autarchēs*). As used by the Stoics and others it means being able to find one’s resources in oneself, being ‘self-sufficient’. Paul, on the contrary, is ‘content’, not because he is self-reliant, but because he has placed all his trust in God as he shares in the communion of love experienced by the risen Christ.

In his correspondence with the Corinthians Paul had occasion to mention some of the situations in which he ‘had little’ (*tapeinoō*, ‘was brought low’) – a word that echoes Jesus’ ‘humbling’ of himself when he ‘became obedient to the point of death - even on a cross’ (2:8):

To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless.

– 1Corinthians 4:11

I was in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.

– 2Corinthians 11:27

It is not his own strength that enables him to cope, it is the strength of the risen Christ who sustains him. This sustaining love comes to Paul (as it comes to us all) in many ways, not least through the care and concern of the Philippians, whose kindness moves Paul again to express his thanks. Their love helps him bear the distress of his present imprisonment (see 1:7).

Paul remembers the support which they gave him when he left Macedonia and was carrying out his mission in Corinth (see also 2Corinthians 11:8-9), and even before that when he was in Thessalonica.

He refers to their generosity in supporting him as ‘a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God’. Earlier he spoke of ‘the sacrifice and offering of your faith’ (2:17). In this, too, they are living the life of Jesus. We recall Paul’s words in his letter to the Ephesians: ‘live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God’ (Ephesians 5:2). We recall also his words to the Romans:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship ... be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

– Romans 12:1-2

Nothing gives God greater pleasure than to see the love of his Son bearing fruit in the lives of his disciples.

It is likely that Paul, as was his custom, added verses twenty-one to twenty-three in his own hand. Rather than single out those in the community whom he knows personally (though through his frequent contacts he may have known most of them), he asks whoever is reading out the letter in the assembly to ‘greet every saint (every member of the community, see 1Corinthians 6:1) in Christ Jesus’. It is as though he goes around the community and speaks personally to each one, greeting them and giving them his love and his thanks.

Philippi is a Roman colony and the relative ease of travel between the two cities may mean that some of the slaves and others in the imperial service in Rome were known to the community in Philippi. He sends special greetings from them and concludes with a prayer that the members of the community in Philippi will experience in their spirit ‘the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ’.

¹⁵You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone.

¹⁶For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once.

¹⁷Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. ¹⁸I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.

¹⁹And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

²⁰To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

²¹Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers and sisters [NRSV ‘friends’] who are with me greet you.

²²All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor’s household.

²³The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.