

TRINITY 16 (Year A) 2020 – Matthew 21:23-32; **Philippians 2:1-13 – ‘Joy’**
Preacher: Reverend Jane Quinton, Curate

Well, I don't know about anyone else but I've actually succumbed and turned my heating on this week! Yes, despite a last burst of sunshine at the beginning of the week, I think autumn has now truly arrived. And darker mornings and evenings herald the signs that winter is on its way.

(Now I wonder - who's more of a summer person and who's more of a winter person here today?)

Although I appreciate all the seasons I probably prefer spring and summer – just because I love the longer and lighter and warmer days But I know some friends who much prefer the winter - they just love to close their curtains early, light a fire and snuggle up in front of the tv.....

I suspect however, that even those who are winter lovers, are not anticipating/*looking forward to* this winter with quite their usual enthusiasm and joy..... Because of course C-19 has changed our world, globally and individually; this silent and invisible virus continues to effect our health, jobs, economy, social lives..... creating understandable anxiety, uncertainty, and fear..... And so this winter, many of those things that people have eagerly anticipated and enjoyed in past years, even Christmas, are not going to be the same.

But God is always wanting to bring light into our darkness.... Hope into despair.....*joy into our circumstances*. And that is what God wants to do once again today, as He encourages us through Paul's letter to the Philippians. This letter is known as the most joyful book in the bible, mentioning the word joy or rejoicing 16 times in just 104 verses.

Because joy is not the same as happiness..... joy is not dependent upon our circumstances, but comes from a deeper place, a spiritual place, where our reliance is on a God who loves us, and can bring good things out of bad.

Which is just what we find here in Paul's letter. Because as Paul writes this letter, where he is inviting these young Philippian Christians "to make his joy complete", Paul is actually in prison! Which I can't imagine would have been Paul's first choice of habitation! I'm sure he would much more have preferred

to be outside and free, teaching and preaching and being with his friends. But Paul is not going to let his circumstances steal his joy.

Indeed, as a deeper reading of this letter to the Philippians reveals, Paul uses this time in prison as a missionary opportunity! In the previous chapter He tells of how his imprisonment is being widely talked about and making other Christians bolder in their own witness. And of course now in this 2nd chapter, we see him encouraging the faith of these new Christians, exhorting them to unity and to modelling themselves on Jesus Christ.

And so what are we to learn and gain and be encouraged by today from Paul and these Philippians?

Firstly, I would compare our circumstances with those of Paul. In that these times we are living through have brought a sense of enforced imprisonment or lack of freedom to each of us in different ways – through literal self-isolation; restrictions on going to work, school, clubs or seeing family and friends; and generally not being able to do all those normal things we used to be able to do and took for granted...

But 'He who is in us is greater than he who is in the world'..... God is bigger than our worldly restrictions – He wants us to be able to know and feel His presence and peace through everything.....and to lean on Him for a joy that is not dependent on our circumstances.....

And secondly, I would invite us to follow the call that Paul is making to the Philippians themselves. In Paul's exhortation for unity within the church in Philippi Paul is reminding these new Christians that the church was not founded on Paul himself – but on Jesus Christ! Although Paul cannot be with them at the moment it doesn't matter, because Paul was only ever pointing them towards God and Jesus – And so it is Jesus to Whom they should be listening and obedient; Jesus on Whom they should be focussed and following the example of And indeed this is an opportunity for God to build them up in their different gifts.

Similarly, although it remains hard and painful that we are unable to meet and worship and study in the ways and to the extent that we have been used to... God has not been effected by the virus, God has not been imprisoned... He is still as active and able and present as ever.....and still wanting to use these circumstances to build His Church.

We can still pray and read His word and listen and learn from Him.....

So today I pray that God will help us to use this time as an opportunity to stop, to re-gather and re-connect with Him to pray and read His word more, and listen and learn from Him..... to trust Him and allow Him to set us free and release those gifts that He has given each one of us....that we may all work together, in new ways, to further His kingdom of love on this earth.

Today be encouraged! Because Jesus is our model, Jesus is our strength, and Jesus is not confined by C-19!

May the 'joy of the living Lord be our strength'

AMEN