

Making an old man very happy

Phil. 2.1-11

I spent a frustrating half-hour trying to find the origin of the expression ‘make an old man very happy’ – because that seems to me to be a very good summary of the reading we have today from Paul’s letter to the Philippians. His way of saying it was ‘make my joy complete’. He was already happy, but that happiness could be even greater. I suppose he could equally well have said ‘make my day’.

There are four things he says would make his day, and four things that would enable that to happen. So make this old man happy by thinking about them with me for a few minutes. They are as relevant to people in Ludlow in 2024 as they were in Philippi in the mid-fifties of the 1st century. Let’s list them: Be of the same mind. Have the same love. Think of others as better than yourselves. Look to other people’s interests. That sounds so simple – but it is as challenging as anything in the New Testament.

Christians have never been very good at being of the same mind. It is pretty clear that the Philippians had been having some in-house struggles which had wasted their time and energy. It would be surprising if there were no differences of opinion in this church – in fact it would probably make you unique. But those divisions are a way of being deflected from what we are really about. Rob Lacey in the Street Bible paraphrased what Paul says here as ‘Sing from the same OHP’. The more a Christian community can contain its differences in a positive way – so that we act together, the better our chances of showing people outside that our faith makes a difference.

Have the same love. If having the same mind is about our heads, then this thing that would make the old man happy is about our hearts. We need to focus our emotional energies in the same direction. You know the word Christian was originally a nickname – ‘the Jesus People’ might put it another way. They got called Christians because they were all always going on about Christ. Their love for their Lord was what people noticed – in the way they talked and in the way they lived. That remains the most powerful missionary tool we still have. All the sophisticated research about how people find faith has come up with a very simple result. The vast majority find faith because of the influence of another person. Christian love is an infection that is so contagious that when we have got a bad dose of it, others are in great danger of catching it from us. We need to keep that focus. It is so easy for it to be diverted. I remember years ago the late Queen took the Cathedral at Ripon to task for wearing scarlet cassocks without her permission. She paid for them to be replaced, in fact. I asked a friend who worked at the Cathedral how the Dean was coping with all the fuss. The reply was ‘I think he says scarlet cassocks more often than he says Amen.’ We need to have our love focussed on Jesus.

Think of others as better than yourselves. I hope you are proud of what has been achieved here, the things Kelvin was talking about the other week. We can be proud in the wrong way of what we achieve – as communities, or as individuals. We can even be proud of being humble. You have probably know that story Rabbi Lionel Blue tells of the Cantor in the synagogue beating his breast and saying ‘I am nothing’. Then the cleaner also beats his breast as says ‘I am nothing’. The Cantor turns to the Rabbi and says ‘Who does he think he is ,saying that I am nothing?’ Maybe you remember Jesus words – ‘When you have done all that you were ordered to do, say ‘We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done.’ And when we have done what we have done, the question is then – what does God expect next of us? There is never a time in the Christian journey, this side of death, when we can say that we have arrived. We have to turn the next corner and move onwards. That is why being a Christian is always a challenge, and never boring.

Then the old man would have his day made if they look to others interests, and not to their own. And of course that is what we have been doing here – making this place available and suitable for all sorts of things which were not possible before. It is about being here for the sake of others. Jesus used lots of powerful images which teach what we are supposed to be – the yeast in the dough, the lamp on the stand. We are supposed to make a difference to the community around us. Our buildings are a precious resource not just for us, and our worship, but for the community which God has called us to serve. And that means taking risks, being open to abuse. Never mind – as Archbishop Temple is supposed to have said ‘the church is the one institution which exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.’

But old Man Paul offers four things that can enable these things to happen and make him happy. The first is that there should be ‘encouragement in Christ’. The word he uses is the same one we find in the New Testament used of the Holy Spirit when he is called ‘the comforter’ – the one who comes alongside. Paul was very fond of that expression ‘in Christ’ – he saw how powerful an idea it was that people who were very different in every way – social background, wealth, intelligence, whatever – those things all fell aside when they realised that they were brothers and sisters in Christ – baptised in his body. We are in this business of being church *together*, not only with each other, but with Jesus. We are the various bits of the body of which he is the head. That is an enormous encouragement. We are not on our own, and Christ leads us.

He says that there should be ‘consolation from love.’ This takes us back into our experience of what God is like. We all have a story to tell about God’s love for us, and what that has meant in various situations in our lives. In as many ways as there are people here, we have known ourselves to be loved. And knowing that is the most liberating and energising thing in the world. It is true of human love, but even more so as we reflect on just how much God has loved us – not just in theory, but in what has happened to us.

He says there should be ‘sharing in the Spirit’. It grows out of that personal experience of love, and takes us into our experience of being part of the Christian family. It is often as communities work together on some project that fellowship grows. You could only do it because of each other. The church is more than the sum total of its members. Together we have an added strength.

And finally he talks of having compassion and sympathy – two words really both meaning shared deep feelings. It is about what we are in our heart of hearts.

If you have these things, he says, then you can do the things that would make an old man happy. But he doesn’t mean it in a wistful way – (and if you don’t then you can’t) he is meaning ‘I *know* that you have encouragement in Christ, consolation from love, sharing in the Spirit and compassion and sympathy, so I *know* you can make me happy.

And then he offers as an example to encourage them words from an ancient hymn about Jesus – probably the oldest example of a hymn we possess. Jesus was clear and focussed in his mind, in his love. He was not proud, and was genuinely ‘the man for others’. All these people in Philippi – and us in Ludlow – have to do is to copy.

What is God asking of us now? God doesn’t call us simply to renew buildings, but to build a new world, to bring in the kingdom, not just the builders. You have got to discover the detail of what that may be. But I can be pretty certain that it will be something along the lines of the things Paul says will; make an old man very happy. I quoted from Rob Lacey’s paraphrase of his words earlier. Let me end by reading them in full:

‘Some questions (Tick Yes or No)

- Are there big pay-offs to having this connection with the Liberator (Jesus) Yes/No
- Does his love get you through the dark times? Yes/No
- Does God’s Holy Spirit pull you together? Yes/No
- Are you moved when tragic things happen? Yes/No

If you’ve ticked ‘Yes’ to all the above, then make my day – love each other! Be united; be one; pull together; sing off the same OHP. Don’t elbow people, step on people, stab people in the back just to get yourself noticed. Put a mirror up to the real you; then look back at anyone else and reckon they’re better than you. Don’t just look after No 1, but also look out for each other.’

And may God bless all that we do in his name to be his people and serve his people in this parish. In doing so we will make many an old man very happy.