Philippians 1:1-11 – Reflections and Prayer

We want to close this evening by spending some time reflecting and praying on the opening of Paul’s letter to the Philippians. The first eleven verses of Philippians introduce us to a number of themes which are then developed in the letter. More importantly, these verses invite us to start our conference by looking to God and to his reality.

Let us listen to how Paul starts his letter:

Read Philippians 1:1-2

Paul writes “to all God’s holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi.” In the Greek text, the word “in” is used twice in this phrase – it literally reads: “in Christ Jesus, in Philippi.”

Where are these Christians? Yes, they are living at Philippi, a Roman colony in the province of Macedonia. As we read on, we will realize that this was not an easy place for Christians to live – they were under pressure from the outside, they were suffering because of their faith.

But these Christians do not only live at Philippi. It is not their primary address. It is not their primary home.

Paul writes “to all God’s holy people in Christ Jesus in Philippi”

Where are they? First and foremost, they are in Christ Jesus. That is their primary address.

Philippi was a very insecure place for Christians to live in. Jesus Christ is the safest possible place there is to live in.

Yes, you are in Oaxtapec. But the deeper reality of your life is that you are in Jesus Christ. That describes best the circumstances of your life. That describes best where you belong. That will always be true no matter what other circumstances surround you. You are in Christ Jesus. We together are in Christ Jesus.

In the next days, we will see how Paul lives out of this source of identity and security. And how he encourages the Philippians and us also to do so!

But before Paul encourages the Philippians to do anything, he thanks God for them:

Read Philippians 1:3-8

“I thank my God every time I remember you. I always pray with joy.” Paul’s prayers are characterized by thanksgiving and joy – not by anxiety. Even though there would be good reasons to be anxious about the Philippian Christians: they are facing pressure from the outside; they are struggling with internal conflicts and Paul himself is in prison: he cannot visit them and help them.

And yet, Paul’s prayers are full of thanksgiving and joy. Why?

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1 This is something which Andrew Page, former General Secretary of ÖSM Austria, helped me to see some years ago.
Paul looks at the Philippian Christians and sees the good work of God in their lives – he sees what God has already done and what God will do in the future.

v.6 Paul is confident that God who began a good work in them will carry it on to completion.

Paul saw God begin his good work in the Philippians. When he first comes to Philippi with the gospel, he meets Lydia. In Acts 16 we read that God opens her heart – and Lydia becomes a believer. God opens her heart – and the hearts of others – and the result is a community of believers at Philippi. Paul thanks God for the partnership in the gospel which grew out of these beginnings: partnership through their common faith in JC and their common concern for the spread of the gospel. This partnership expressed itself very concretely when the Philippians sent Epaphroditus with a gift of money in order to take care of Paul and his needs.

Paul thanks God for the Philippians and their partnership in the gospel – he sees all of this as flowing out of God’s good work in their lives.

And so, as Paul now prays for the Philippians, he is confident: God will bring his good work to completion.

Paul is convinced: in the midst of pressure, suffering, internal conflicts and sin – God is doing his good work. And he will continue to do his good work until it is completed. What a deep assurance.

Paul can pray with thanksgiving and joy for the Philippians because of God’s good work in their lives.

What do you see in the lives of other Christians? What determines your perspective as you pray for them? So often, when we pray, we make problems and challenges the centre of our attention – and then even our prayers end up revolving around problems.

Paul’s prayers turn around God, placing him and his good work in the centre. The result is a beautiful perspective of thanksgiving on the lives of other Christians.

I invite you to enter into this perspective during our gathering here. Look around you... do it... this room is full of people inviting us joyfully to thank God! Look at the person next to you – he/she is someone in whom God has begun his good work and will bring his good work to completion; Look at the person in front of you – he/she is a partner in the gospel – with whom you have fellowship in Jesus Christ and in mission.

As we meet one another and hear more about what God is doing in our lives and how he has brought us together as partners in the gospel – let’s respond with thanksgiving to God.

We see here how Paul thanks God – not for things, but for people. In his letter to the Philippians, he goes on to name a number of people who partnered with him in the gospel: Timothy, Epaphroditus, Euodia, Syntyche.

Let us have a moment of prayer – in which you can write down names of people with whom you have partnered in the gospel. As you prayerfully write down these names, do so with thanksgiving and joy – remembering the good work of God in their lives and trusting that he will bring his work to completion. Please actually write down specific names.
Let’s now have this time of silent thanksgiving for people who have partnered with us in the gospel: silent prayer.

Let us now listen to what is on Paul’s heart for the Philippian Christians – and how this expresses itself in prayer to God:

**Read Philippians 1:9-11**

Paul prays – not for the circumstances to change – but for fruit to grow. He prays for a lifestyle that is abounding in love, pure and blameless, filled with the fruit of righteousness.

This prayer reflects the major concern of Paul’s letter to the Philippians. In Philippians 1:27, Paul writes: *Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.* And then Paul develops what he means by this in the following chapters.

And so one of the questions we will be asking here at WA is: What does it mean to live lives worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ? What did that look like for the Philippians – a small Christian minority facing pressure from the outside? What did that look like for Daniel and his friends – young men seeking to live their faith in a foreign environment? What does it look like for us today to live lives worthy of the gospel – in our different contexts and challenges?

We do not have the time tonight to look at the whole content of Paul’s prayer. I want to briefly comment only on one element of it – one significant aspect of living worthy of the gospel:

v. 9 “that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.”

Paul prays for their love to grow – and we will see later in this letter that the model for this love is the self-giving, servant love of Jesus himself.

**Did you notice how closely this prayer links love and knowledge; love and insight?** We sometimes think that we get knowledge and insight by looking at people or things from a distance: with a neutral perspective and little personal involvement. Paul’s prayer suggests that love is the proper context for knowledge and depth of insight. As we look with love at God, at others, and at our world – we will learn to really know. As we lovingly serve God, others, and our world – we will grow in our understanding of reality. Love enables us to see through the appearance of things to their deeper meaning. It is out of an attitude of love that we learn to see what really matters – that we can discern, not only what is good, but what is best. A neutral position is not the way to insight. It is love.

Let us pray that a deep love to Jesus and to other people might shape our conversations about our mission to the university – and that out of an attitude of love, we may grow in knowledge and insight to see what really matters.

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Much more could be said about Paul’s prayer – I want to stop here and instead invite you to pray for one another. Let’s enter into this deep concern of God for fruit in our lives – that we might live lives worthy of the Gospel. Let’s pray this prayer for one another in the expectation that these days at WA will be a part of the answer, helping to grow this fruit in us.
In pairs, please pray for one another. You can simply use the words from Phil. 1: 9-11 to pray for your neighbour. Or you can pray these words from Philippians and as you do so add words of your own –but please keep it simple and short.

Feel free to pray in your own language, even if the other person cannot understand you. Try and do this in pairs – always two people praying for each other – or, if that doesn’t work out, you can form triplets with three people praying for each other.

Prayer in pairs

Closing prayer for World Assembly