

Should I stay or should I go? Philippians 1: 21- end

I was talking with an older Christian, who, coming to the end of what they acknowledged was a good and full life, said ... *if I didn't wake up tomorrow... it would be OK.* To my shame, when I heard this, my internal reaction was: *I don't think like that ... Instead, I think... well there are things I'd still like to do and see in the world... there are things I'd like to finish... and not just War and Peace or the ironing...*

But it seems that perspective is in view for Paul as he writes to Christians in the Greek/Roman city of Philippi. ...*For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain*, he writes.

This letter comes, as clues in text indicate, while Paul was under house arrest, possibly in Rome itself. Like most of Paul's other letters this is written to a community he knows, where he has already been instrumental in establishing the Christian church. You can read the back story to Paul's visit to Philippi in Acts 16.

Paul's declaration is real... and truly existential... at one level... since he is, as he puts it, *in chains*, under house arrest, awaiting trial, he doesn't have much choice... The decision about whether he is to live or to die will be made for him, by the Roman judicial system... But at another level, we can see Paul deliberately aligning himself with God's plan for his life. He's reframing the shame that surrounds being arrested and on trial and perhaps even condemned to death. Reframing it as both an opportunity to live in a way that is loyal to Christ, and the means of being with Christ in the life beyond this life. *My desire is to depart and be with Christ*, he writes. And then he considers that unfinished work... what his staying alive will mean for the spread of the gospel and for the flourishing of these Christians in Philippi: *to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you*. And he writes about a return visit to Philippi.

It's quite hard for us to imagine ourselves in Paul's situation... but what about the recipients? How do we connect with them? Well, they were Christians in a city in northern Greece. Named after Philip II of Macedon (father of Alexander the Great), Philippi was at this time a Roman colony. Like my hometown, Colchester, its population would have been boosted by Roman soldiers and their families. The city would have observed Roman law and custom, including the practice of emperor worship. So, you've got Greek culture with an overlay of Roman values. And now a small group of Christians, too.

The live/die situation that Paul describes is less intense and pointed for his recipients... They're not in prison... they may not be facing persecution... but still the same question is asked – where do your loyalties lie? What is your primary identity? Are you a good Roman citizen and *then* a Christian... are you a soldier and *then* a Christian... are you (like my namesake and early convert mentioned in Acts) a trader in purple dye and *then* a Christian? Paul is encouraging his readers to think of things the other way around...

Paul's invitation may chime with us, too... what's our primary affiliation... how do we think of ourselves? A scientist and *then* a Christian... a grandma and *then* a Christian... a teacher *then* a Christian?

Let's think about the choice the Philippian Christians have made in following Jesus...

In Philippi, as in the wider Roman empire, there's the whole pantheon of gods on offer. You might honour household gods at home, take part in public sacrifices to civic deities - the god who protected your city (this was Philip II of Macedon for Philippi) plus the emperor. Then you might have belonged to a professional cult or be initiated into a mystery cult such as those of Mithras or Isis.

But, instead, Paul and his readers have chosen Christ...not lots of gods but one... This singular loyalty is where the Christians run into trouble. Religion was considered a public expression of loyalty and social participation.... Taking part in the usual religious ceremonies was a civic duty ... it would help maintain harmony between gods and state. Many Christians' refusal to join in would have been considered subversive...Now we may not face that kind of pressure, but Christian worship is increasingly a marginal thing... according to the latest British Social Attitudes Survey, only 5% of British adults say they attend a weekly church service. We may not be viewed with suspicion, as the Philippian Christians probably were, but we are definitely taking part in a minority sport.

Faced with their situation, what does Paul say is important for these Christians?

Live lives worthy of the gospel... he advocates. Here, our translation has missed a trick... literally, Paul writes *live as citizens of the gospel*, God's realm. Philippi may be a Roman colony, but the Christians there belong to Christ's realm... That means being a good citizen will be rather different to how it is for their neighbours. The ultimate example for these Christians is the life of Christ. We'll look next week in more detail at that.

But I just want to stress one thing: there's an important community dimension to Paul's approach. The whole letter is a call to unity of mind and purpose... So, he calls his readers to *stand firm in one spirit...* to *strive sided by side with one mind...* They are a small and unpopular minority: their connectedness to each other will be vital to their mutual flourishing.

Lastly, how's our loyalty?

A few years ago, Duxford school needed to choose a Bible verse that would be part of its identity, and they chose a line from 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 *Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing...* I'd like to think that's one of our aims as church, too... that mutual support and encouragement... The church is the community where we can learn loyalty safely... where we can learn deep art of

loving each other as Christ has loved us... where we can bear with each other and care for each other and build up each other so that we can share that love with the world around us

As we reflected, we listened to Peter Nardone's setting of Jesus' words from John's gospel: *I give you a new commandment: love one another as I have loved you.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a0L8WV7mXAo>