

We come today to the last reading and sermon on a six-week series that we've had on the Book of Philippians. We've gone through each four chapters and today we come to the very end of the book, and we finally get to the point of the letter. Philippians is written as a thank you note. And we read here that the church in Philippi have sent a gift to St. Paul, who's in prison, by a man called Epaphroditus, who has the misfortune of having a name that sounds like a rather terrible illness. And Paul is writing back to thank them because the gift has been delivered. It is probably right at the end of the letter, as when the first letter was... it would've been read out to his hearers. So, the technique was to put the main point of the letter right at the end, so the hearers would be aware of what the main takeaway of the letter was. So, it ends with them hearing that Paul was thanking them for his gift.

Although it is a slightly awkward thank you note, I don't know if you notice that, it begins with Paul saying, "At last, you have revived your concern for me." I've always thought that any thank you note that had the phrase, "At last," in it probably wasn't going to be very successful. And then he seems at pains to point out that he didn't actually need the gift that they'd sent him, but he does get there in the end and offers them a fulsome thank you for their gift.

I just want to take a few minutes to focus on just one word that comes in this reading, and that word is content. Paul says, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have." Paul's very clever in his writings and he's doing here what he does in many of his letters, which is to take a word that his hearers would be familiar with from a slightly different context, and he takes it to make the connection and then gives it a new meaning, twists the meaning into a way that makes his point. And that's what he's doing here. It's not immediately obvious in our translation, but I hope to make it clear as I go on and offer two readings of what Paul is saying when he uses the word content. There's a surface reading, and then there's the deeper reading that his first hearers would've been aware of when they heard that word.

But it's not hard to understand what Paul is saying here. "I've learned to be content with what I have," he says. "I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. And in both cases, I'm

content." And he says later, "I have more than enough. Being content," he says, "is the secret of being well-fed, and of going hungry." As we heard him say last week in the passage that we looked at then, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice." And that theme of joy and rejoicing has been running throughout this Book of Philippians. Paul's reached a stage in his life, when in whatever situation he finds himself in, and he's writing this letter from prison, he's found a place of deep joy and contentment. So he can say, "Rejoice in the Lord always."

I think it might be harder for us to get to such a place, to find the level of contentment Paul did, for many reasons. One is that we're bombarded with the false narrative of scarcity. Do you know that the average American sees between four and 10,000 adverts a day? We only notice 100, but we're surrounded by advertising. And the whole advertising industry is built upon promoting a notion of scarcity. They all tell us something that we lack, that our life would be better if we had whatever it was they were trying to sell. Apple have just released the iPhone 15. You never hear an advert that says, "The iPhone 14 phone is really good. Just enjoy all you could do with an Apple iPhone 14." You never get that. No sooner has the 14 come out, they're flogging the 15.

I want to repeat something I said last week, a great quote from G.K. Chesterton. I liked it so much, I'm going to repeat it. "Faith might be defined as the power which makes us joyful about the things that matter. Fashionable frivolity might be defined as the power which makes us sad about the things that do not matter." Contentment is all about finding out what really matters in life. That's where we get close to contentment. That's where true joy is to be found. For many of us...not everyone...particularly, we're thinking of those this morning in Gaza. For many of us, it's not scarcity that's the problem, it's abundance. Abundance can often be the barrier to finding true joy and true contentment. When we're given so much that our cup runneth over, the tendency is to go out and buy a bigger cup, and suddenly our cup looks half empty.

Martin Luther said, "The greater God's gifts and works, the less they are regarded." That's so true. Imagine if the constellation in the night sky only

happened once every 100 years. We'd all be out there, looking to see what was in the sky. But because it's there every night, we don't notice. We don't pay attention. Paul's secret of contentment is learning to give thanks. It's all about gratitude.

Stephen Fry, the great British actor, is an outspoken atheist, and he said this. "Most of us don't say grace before meals these days because we don't know who to thank for the inestimable pleasures of the table." How true, but how sad. Stephen Fry doesn't know who to thank for the riches of this life, for the food he enjoys eating, but we do. We can thank the God who made us, who created the world. That's the person to whom we give thanks, from whom everything comes to us as gift. Contentment begins with gratitude.

The famous stress researcher, Hans Selye, identified two attitudes that more than any other influence the quality of everyday life. And these two emotions, he said, "on these depend our peace of mind, our feelings of security or insecurity, of fulfillment or frustration. In short, the extent to which we can make a success of life. The most destructive emotion is revenge. But in contrast, among all the emotions, there is one which more than any other accounts for the absence or presence of stress in human relations, that is the feeling of gratitude."

Julie, our stewardship chair, who spoke last week, has been encouraging us to cultivate an attitude of gratitude. She invited us last week to make a list of five things for which we are grateful. Well, I need to tell her about a young woman I heard of this week called Barbara Ann Kipfer, who as a shy teenager started to write lists of things for which she was grateful. 20 years later she's published a book, the title of which is 14,000 Things to Be Happy About. So, Julie, you have some way to go yet. We would all benefit by learning to be grateful.

In the devotional book *Springs in the Valley*, there's a story of a man who found a barn where Satan kept his seeds ready to be sown in the human heart. And he found that the seeds of discouragement were more plentiful than any other seeds. And he learned that those seeds could be made to grow almost anywhere. But when Satan was questioned, he reluctantly admitted that there was one place where he couldn't get his seeds of discouragement to thrive.

"And where's that?" asked the man. And Satan replied, "In the heart of the grateful person."

Briefly, I want to go on and mention that deeper meaning of the word content. It's one of the most significant words in Greek philosophy. And his hearers, their ears would've pricked up as soon as they heard it. They'd have known what he was talking about. And that's no accident, because as I said, Paul deliberately takes these words and fills them with new meaning. And the word he's taking here is the Greek word "autarkes". It's a favorite word of the Stoic philosophers. To them, it meant to be content in the sense of becoming entirely self-sufficient, not needing anything or anyone.

The Stoics train themselves to be indifferent to desire and emotion. The Stoics' aim was to abolish every feeling and emotion in the human heart. The Stoic said, "I will learn contentment by a deliberate act of my will." Paul, in contrast, said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." For the Stoic, contentment was a human achievement. For Paul, contentment was a divine gift. The Stoic was self-sufficient. St. Paul was God sufficient. Paul could face anything. He could have nothing. He could have an abundance of things. It made no difference, because in every situation he knew Jesus, and the riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

I want to close by sharing another verse in the writings of St. Paul, where he talks about riches. He says this. "In Christ we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of His grace that He has lavished on us." I love that word, lavished. It speaks of God's abundance to us. May we find our contentment in the riches of God's grace that He has lavished on each one of us. Amen.