

Sermon – 27/12/2009 am

Is Boasting Bad?

Study Text: Philippians 2:16-18

Local schools recently had their annual presentation day. Parents went along to see their children receive an award, a reward for their studies, for their sport or drama, a reward for kindness or community service. The children were pleased to receive these rewards for the time and effort they put into their tasks. Parents felt a sense of pride as they shared in their child's achievement. There is nothing wrong with such feelings, with being proud of the achievements of a loved one. But what about boasting? It is one thing to be proud but another to boast.

Labour

Writing to the Philippians, Paul said *that I may boast in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or laboured in vain* (2:16). The New King James Version softens this boasting by using the word 'rejoice', but this is not the same word as that translated 'rejoice' in the following verses. Boasting in the sense of self praise is not proper. We should not boast in our achievements and seek glory for ourselves. *Not unto us, not to us, but to your name be the glory* (Psalm 115). Paul writes *he who glories let him glory in the Lord* (II Corinthians 10:17).

Paul was most reluctant to boast, even when others were doing so. But seeing the church at Corinth being taken in by men boasting in the Law, or boasting in the flesh as he called it, he confessed to a little foolish boasting. *I also will boast in the flesh* he wrote but said it was foolish to do so (II Corinthians 11:16f). But here in Philippians he was not boasting in the flesh, or in his own achievements. He was boasting in the people of God. He was being thankful for these believers as they held fast the word of life.

The apostle Paul brought the gospel to this city. He preached the truth that he received from the Lord. He taught those who believed how to live as the children of God. To the Corinthians he wrote *Brothers I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you – unless you believed in vain* (I Corinthians 15:1-2). To the Thessalonians he wrote *what is our hope, or joy or crown of rejoicing? Is it not you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? For you are our glory and joy* (I Thessalonians 2:19). He was expressing the same joy in the Philippians.

Paul rejoiced, indeed boasted, in the thought of these believers being faithful until the day of Christ. He saw himself as being like an athlete in a race. He was striving to get to the finish line. He was of course thankful for the start, for the day that Christ met him on the road to Damascus. But that was the beginning. Christ called him to run the race, to labour in the task given to him as bondservant of Jesus Christ. He was focusing on the finish, on the day he would be with Christ in glory. He was focused on receiving the crown of rejoicing on the day of Christ.

Labouring is not an easy life. The word carries the sense of toiling and sweating. Paul gave himself completely to the work of the gospel and in doing so suffered greatly. He did not become a missionary to get rich or to become famous. At the time of writing this letter he was in chains because of the gospel. But he was not complaining. He was rejoicing. He was rejoicing that the Lord was using him to spread the gospel and build up the church. He was rejoicing in this church at Philippi as he remembered them. He prayed that this rejoicing would continue until the coming of Christ.

Paul was concerned that his labour would not be in vain or that it not be empty. In Corinthians he writes *always abound in the work of the Lord knowing that your labour is not in vain in the Lord* (I Corinthians 15:58). In one sense no labour in the Lord is in vain. It is in vain of course if a false or incomplete gospel is proclaimed. We must proclaim the whole counsel of God. It is in vain if it is done with false motives. Not that the message is less effective but the one who preaches out of envy, seeking to bring harm to others, as some were doing in Rome, will have no sense of fulfilment when people believe in Jesus.

Preaching with pure motives Paul felt proud of those who believed in Jesus through his preaching. They were children of God but also in a sense his children. He referred to Timothy as his *beloved and faithful son in the Lord* (I Corinthians 4:17). He prayed for them continually. He wrote to them. He was concerned for their well being and their spiritual growth. It was okay for him to feel proud of them. If there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents should their not be rejoicing on earth also?

Baptisms are always a time of rejoicing, although for some it is the start of a life of suffering and persecution – as with Paul. But notice that Paul does not boast in their baptism. Many preachers focus upon baptism because it is such a tangible thing. In India the Hindus only consider you a Christian when you are baptised. Such preachers think their work is done when they baptise a person. They boast in the number of baptisms they perform. But we see nothing of this with Paul. He kept on teaching the converts how to live as God's children in this world. He rejoiced in their beginning the race but his greatest rejoicing would be when they finished.

He would boast in the day of Christ. What is this day? It is the day when Jesus comes again in glory, when he comes in judgment upon this world. Jesus will not come again as a baby but as a king, King of kings and Lord of lords. He will not come in humiliation but in glory. Paul kept his eyes focused on that day and taught believers to do the same. That day may come before we die or it may come after.

Paul was in prison awaiting the outcome of his trial. This might mean death, although he was confident of being released. His death would be the end of his earthly ministry. It would in a sense be the day of Christ. He looked forward to that day, to finishing the race and receiving his heavenly reward.

Sacrifice

Verse 17 is not easy to understand because we are not so familiar with sacrifices and libations or drink offerings. Jews were very familiar with such things. The Gentiles were also people who sacrificed animals. 'Whether the underlying figure is the Jewish libation, poured out beside the altar, or the pagan libation poured out over the sacrifice, makes no difference'

writes Hendrikson. As Christians we do not make blood sacrifices but we give ourselves to the Lord as living sacrifices.

Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service (Romans 12:1). This was the sacrifice Paul was thinking of as he wrote of *the sacrifice and service of your faith* (2:17). Their giving of themselves to the Lord to walk humbly before him, to look out for the needs and interests of others, and to do all things without grumbling or arguing, was an acceptable sacrifice to God.

Paul rejoiced and boasted before the Lord at such sacrificial living. He rejoiced at their obedience to the gospel that he preached to them. It was as if his life was a drink offering being poured out on their sacrifice. They were the fruit of his labour. They were children of God but in some ways his children also. He could feel proud of their sacrificial and faith service and rejoice together with them.

I recently heard a lady, who felt too sick to go to church, express concern that the preacher would be disappointed if he did not see her in her seat in church. I wonder how many people share her feelings. Of course we do not go to church just to make the preacher feel good but we should have a sense of commitment to the fellowship of God's people – not just the preacher but other members of the church as well.

Rejoice

A Christian must never feel good when a brother or sister suffers or falls into sin. The Lord condemned the nations that gloated over Israel's misery when God punished her. We must not go along with the tall poppy syndrome of the world. Of course there should be no tall poppies in the church. Equality and impartiality must be marks of the church. Christian joy ought always to be mutual.

I am glad and rejoice with you all wrote Paul (2:17). In the next verse he wrote *you also be glad and rejoice with me*. They were not just people who believed at one of his meetings, another baptism for him to add to his tally. He had them in his heart because they were partakers with him of grace (1:7). He shared his troubles with them and also his joys. He wanted them to do the same. *Open your hearts to us* he told the Corinthians (II Corinthians 7:1). The church is a body; 'it is an organism not an organisation' as we say. We must live in this body in active fellowship with the Lord and with one another.

We share out troubles and pray for one another in such troubles. Let us also share our joys and give thanks together to the Lord. In fact Paul tells us to rejoice always, in whatever situation we are in. His prayer is that we will rejoice together in the Lord.

May the Lord lead and guide us into such oneness and such rejoicing. May we be able to mourn with those who mourn, weep with those who weep, and rejoice with those who rejoice. May we especially rejoice when we see brothers and sisters walking in the Spirit and growing in the Lord. May we encourage one another in doing so, and all the more as we see the Day of the Lord approaching.

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