



# Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church October 12, 2014

## Phillippians 4: 1-9

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*Many of you will be familiar with the reading Footsteps in the Sand, a devotional piece that pictures life as a walk with God on a beach. Viewing the footsteps, the writer asks God why there is only one set of prints at various times on the walk; "Where you God, in those times?" And God answers, "My child, they were the times that I was carrying you". A modern satire on this reading has God also say, "And do you see those lines in the sand, they are where I was dragging you". However, whether walking with, carrying or dragging, the point of the reading is that in all of our life, we are not alone, God is near.*

Locked in prison, Paul writes to his beloved church in Philippi and despite imprisonment, possible impending death and concerns about what is happening in the church, he writes a letter with the dominant theme of joy. Joy in his faith, joy in the church and churches he has founded and joy the Gospel goes on. This is not just the power of positive thinking, this is joy based in one thing – the Lord is near. Like that walk on the beach, the Lord is near. In that nearness is the vision of faith to see the world as the unfolding kingdom. Yes, there is concern for the problems in the church at Philippi, yes there is a deep longing to be free to visit and share in the ministry and yes there is a tinge of concern about his fate at the hands of the authorities but here we have a letter that uses the words of joy 12 times in 4 short chapters; not just his joy but the instruction to the readers – 'Rejoice in the Lord always, and I repeat, rejoice. Let the world see your patient endurance, confident that the Lord is with you'.

Verses 4 to 6 can look a bit like 'don't worry, be happy', but this is an encouragement based in the faithful understanding that God is near, available in prayer and willing to bring a peace that enables joy to flourish. Don't live your life in worry, bring your concerns to God in prayer with thanks. Seeing and acknowledging what God has done, opens our eyes to see what God is doing and what God can do. That is the basis for rejoicing, even in the midst of troubles, suffering and stress.

This letter, and particularly this section is the very opposite of the so-called Prosperity Gospel – give your life to Christ and God will bless you with wealth, health and happiness. This is not 'Rejoice, for God will take away all your troubles'; this is 'Rejoice, for God is with you in your troubles'. This is the confident faith shown by the prophet Habakkuk:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,  
and no fruit is on the vines;  
though the produce of the olive fails,  
and the fields yield no food;  
though the flock is cut off from the fold,  
and there is no herd in the stalls;  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord.

When the Good News Bible was launched, some people were quite irate at the translation of the Beatitudes – “Happy are the poor etc.” They complained, “We may be blessed but we are not happy, our faith is much deeper than shallow concepts like happy”. So it is here with Paul’s instruction to the church; he doesn’t say, “Be happy with your lot in life”, he says “Rejoice”. We may not be happy with the world and what is happening, but in faith we can rejoice that God is near, listening and seeing and acting.

And this idea goes through this whole passage we heard today; Euodia and Syntyche, don’t live your lives in contention, bring your concerns to God in prayer with thanks for all that God has done in the life of the community, and let the world see your gentleness and forbearance.

And all of you, look to the good that God is doing in your midst; rejoice in all the things that are true, honourable, pure and pleasing and look out for what God is doing that is excellent and praise worthy – there is your basis for bringing your concerns to God in prayer and thanks.

Live your lives with joy, patiently enduring all because the Lord is beside you. Bring all your concerns and thanks to God so that you may know the peace that will guide and keep your desires and your plans. Amen.