

Green Philippians:
Three Sermons on Paul's Letter to the Philippians
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Sermon One – Living the Gospel

Acts 16:11-15; Philippians 1:27-2:4

How could we gladden God's heart and what does that have to do with bird boxes and bumble bees? And can Saint Paul have anything to significant say about any of those things through a letter he wrote to Christians in Philippi almost two thousand years ago?

Yesterday, I was in Perth, at the Annual Gathering of Eco-Congregation Scotland. About one hundred people from the three hundred and fifty plus registered eco-congregations attended. The theme was *Making Space for Nature in Your Church*, and we had speakers and seminars to help us explore all of this. It was a successful event and I came away feeling very pleased about it.

I even suspect that God would have been pleased – that it would have gladdened the heart of God – but what grounds do I have for thinking or saying that? When God logs on to the Eco-Congregation website and comes across our recent item

offering *Ten Tips for Attracting Wildlife to Your Garden or Churchyard* does that bring a joyful smile to the face of God? Do suggestions regarding bird boxes and bird feeders, bat boxes, bumble bee hotels and caterpillar-attracting plants elicit divine delight and approval?

Saint Paul would like to be pleased. In fact he wants to be joyful, but circumstances are against that, since he is back in prison, probably in Rome (there's mention of a Praetorium and Caesar's household in the letter). He can't be with his friends in Philippi so he writes to them, opening his letter with, to 'all the saints who are in Christ Jesus in Philippi, with the overseers and helpers' (1:1), those who lead and enable that congregation.

Paul has a positive view of these people – they are his friends – of whom he says, 'I thank God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.' (1: 3-5) It would be great if Saint Paul wrote in similar terms to us!

Paul then tells the folk at Philippi, 'live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ' (1:27), which is where today's reading begins. He pleads with

them to act in ways that will encourage and console him in prison, by actions and attitudes of sharing, compassion and sympathy towards him. All of this happens if they live a life ‘worthy of the gospel of Christ’; this will make his ‘joy complete’ (2:2).

It’s not my job or yours to make Saint Paul joyful and, to be fair, that’s not primarily what Paul wants from the Philippians either. Paul is going to be joyful if, when and because they live out their lives ‘in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ’; not just in order to make Paul joyful.

Just as an aside, there’s a lesson there concerning church today. Be careful not to organise or make decisions about a congregation’s life simply on the basis of making people happy, even people we like and admire. There’s nothing wrong with churches making people happy but that should flow from a focus on living out the gospel of Christ, not from planning to do things we think will please others.

So let’s explore what it means in the here and now to ‘live your [collective] life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ’. Since Saint Paul is only too eager

to fill in some detail as to what that means for Philippian Christians, we get some clues about how we might express all of that in our own situation.

Here's what he had to say then: 'Make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others' (2:2-4.) There's a lot in these couple of verses and much to be gained from them. They **might** even help me with my question about how to make the link between God and bird boxes, but before I get there I just need to issue a couple of health warnings.

'Be of the same mind ... in full accord and of one mind' does not mean having a church where everyone has to sign up to every detail of church doctrine and declarations of faith. The 'same mind' and the 'one mind' Paul writes about is closer to what we might call a "mind-set"; a perspective on the world shared by diverse people who hold a diversity of views, guiding them on living together as one community in God's world. This mind-set of Christians is to be modelled on the mind of Christ Jesus. What that involves is the focus of the next sermon, so if you want to know more ...

The second health warning concerns Paul's suggestion that they 'in humility regard others as better than yourselves'. Be very careful here for every congregation contains people who have suffered from being told in wounding ways that others are better than they are; that they are inferior to others. Let me be clear that the 'gospel of Christ' does not require anyone to be a 'doormat for Jesus'; someone others feel they can trample upon. In fact, go back to the address that heads this letter to the congregation: 'to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi'; all the saints. Paul declares that they are **all** 'saints'; **all** people with a high and equal status that comes from being 'in Christ'.

No number of perceived or even actual human flaws can rob any one of them or any one of us – we who associate ourselves with Jesus because Jesus associates himself with us - of the equal and high status of being a **saint**. If Saint Paul does suggest that we saints work on a basis that others are better than ourselves what that tells us is about how well we should aspire to treat others, never that others are justified in badly treating us.

Which brings me back, at last, and not before time you might think, to God and bird boxes, and to the final line of our passage from this part of Philippians: 'Let

each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others' (2:4)

That sounds nice in the abstract: look not to your own interests but to the interests of others, but what could it mean in practice to look not to your own interests but to the interests of others?

For Paul, it affects how followers of Jesus treat others who are also part of the congregation and how they treat others who are not part of the congregation but are fellow-dwellers in their city. If you have been associated with a church for any length of time, or any association of human beings, you don't need me to tell you that sometimes there are struggles and conflicts.

Paul tells the Philippians to look not to their own interests but to the interests of others in the knowledge that, like every other congregation then and since, they are a very much **imperfect** bunch, prone to argument and conflict. We know this for a fact because later on the letter he takes time to plead with two of the women leaders, Euodia and Syntyche, 'to be of the same mind in the Lord' (4:2), and for others in the group to help this couple be at peace.

So, if there should ever be differences, disagreements or conflicts in the life of a congregation – even my own – it wouldn't hurt to remember these words from

Paul. Bearing in mind that that none of us are called to be doormats for Jesus, and that each and every one of us is a saint, approach these moments, committed to others on the basis of what is in their interest, rather than in yours.

What works for the congregation also affects how we relate to the community around us, and those within it who do not share our perspective. For first century Philippian Christians this might include dealing with local government officials who saw them as disturbers of the public peace, customers who no longer shopped with them, or family members who would not associate with them.

To take a specific, contemporary example, concerning our thinking and our conversation with others, how might looking to the interest of others rather than our own interests affect the choices we make and commend when an election to the Scottish parliament almost upon us and a referendum on the European Union is close behind? And as for what a Christian political mind-set might have to say to anyone who has a vote in the forthcoming election for President of the USA ...

Then, finally, can we push things just that little bit further concerning the “others” whose interests we are putting ahead of our own interests? Since we can apply this not just in the life of a congregation but also in the wider human context of the city and the political landscape can we push it just a bit further? If we have a mind-set of putting the interests of others first can we apply that in the context of God’s creation?

Do the fish of the sea, the birds of the air and every living thing that move upon the earth (Gen. 1:28) qualify as “others”? I think they must do, being other creatures created and loved by God. Does the landscape, the seascape, or the air that we breathe, qualify as an “other”, with interests demanding our attention and care, or are they simply “things”, designed to serve human desires? I don’t see the air that I breathe in the same way I see another human being, but when pushed by Paul to consider “others” before myself, I become more wary of dismissing calls for better air quality.

So, bird boxes and bird feeders and all those other ideas for making a space for nature in our church, our communities and upon the stage of God’s creation are for me now wrapped up in the whole matter of looking to the interests of others before my own. Bat boxes and bumble bee hotels gladden the heart of God the creator and have a claim upon us. When we act, putting the interests of the

“others” of creation ahead of our own interests, perhaps even Saint Paul smiles and is joyful.

*This is an edited version of a sermon preached at Augustine United Church,
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