

**13 September 2020**

**West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood**

By: Rev Drs André & Jonanda Groenewald

Reading: Philippians 3:10-21

Hymn: CH4 396 And can it be?

---

**PRAYER**

Lord God,  
as we journey towards the goal you set before us,  
we see glimpses of who you are,  
often too deep and unimaginable  
to grasp fully the depth of your being.  
What we see and feel spurs us on  
in our journey to discover more of you.

God of the journey of life,  
the mystery of our very being,  
we confess that the journey we take  
gets disrupted and we get side-tracked.  
We go off on wild goose chases that lead us nowhere,  
up blind alleys and into bad and barren places.  
We find our way back to you in sorrow for our failings  
and in penitence for our wanderings.

May we be *enriched* by your welcome,  
*relieved* by your forgiveness  
and *comforted* by your all-embracing love...

We ask this in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray:

*Our Father, who art in heaven,*

*Hallowed be thy name.*

*Thy kingdom come,*

*Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*

*Give us this day our daily bread*

*And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.*

*And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

*For Thine is the kingdom, the power, the glory for ever.*

*Amen.*

## **READING**

### **Philippians 3:10-21**

*The apostle Paul wrote:*

<sup>10</sup> I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

<sup>12</sup> Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. <sup>13</sup> Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

<sup>15</sup> All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. <sup>16</sup> Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

<sup>17</sup> Join together in following my example, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, keep your eyes on those who live as we do. <sup>18</sup> For, as I have often told you before and now tell you again even

with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. <sup>19</sup> Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. <sup>20</sup> But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>21</sup> who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

## **MESSAGE**

*André:*

In the letter to the Philippians the word “joy” is used 16 times. The letter seems to have a cheery tone and you would expect and assume that the writer, Paul, was in an exceptionally good place in his life for being able to express so much joy.

The opposite is true. He was in prison whilst writing this letter to the congregation in Philippi. Paul had a special place for this congregation in his heart. Although the Macedonian converts were, as a class, poor – according to 2 Corinthians 8:2 – their poverty did not keep them from financially supporting Paul’s ministry.

Philippi was also the capital of the Roman province of Macedonia, ten miles inland from the modern port city of Kavalla (or in ancient times called “Neapolis”). In the time of the Emperor Augustus this city became a Roman colony, with a military settlement of Roman soldiers. It was a “miniature Rome,” under the municipal law of Rome, and governed by military officers, who were appointed directly from Rome.

Despite being in prison under very harsh circumstances, Paul reiterates 16 times in this letter that they must be joyful in the Lord.

The word that is translated with “joy”, “χαίρω”, does not mean shallow happiness or describing the absence of emotional distress. Although he had more than enough reason to sulk and to moan, he did not. Instead of feeling sorry for himself, he was thinking of others. Instead of focussing on his own problems and troubles, he was thinking of the needs of this congregation in Philippi, and he knew where his true hope was founded.

Our reading is in many ways an explanation of why Paul could manage to carry on with his ministry despite all the challenges he faced on a daily level. Paul’s life was fuelled by his faith, hope and love in the Lord. He experienced a deep peace within himself. Paul could look at his circumstances with the knowledge that He can trust the Lord. He also had peace with God and therefore with others as well. He managed to see the Sovereign Lord above all his trying circumstances. He trusted God’s control over him. He worked extremely hard to keep his faith in the Lord alive. We can hear this even in our reading this morning.

He says his ministry and life of faith is like running a race where he only sees the finishing line where Christ is waiting for him in God’s eternal kingdom. Paul was off course referring to something that was well known in his day. The Olympian games were the chief national festival of the Greeks, being given in honour of Zeus at Olympia every four years, and were chiefly gymnastic, though equestrian and musical contests were added.

There were also other games, but athletic games were especially favoured by the Greeks (but less favoured by the Romans). The Romans favoured those contests that involved danger and bloodshed. Usually the prize for the winners was only a wreath of leaves, such as olive or laurel, but great honour was shown them by their fellow citizens.

Paul urges them to live by his example, to do the same! Ancient teachers often urged their disciples or pupils to follow their example. He does not want them to go astray, as Paul rightly points out some people do. When he speaks of his tears, he actually is saying that he speaks with love and compassion.

Citizens of Philippi, a Roman colony, were automatically citizens of Rome, sharing all the rights and privileges of Roman citizens even though most of them had never been in Rome. Likewise, Paul is saying that everyone who believes in the saving grace of Jesus Christ, is citizens of heaven, even though they have never been there before. And in heaven the bodies of the believers will be transformed into “heavenly bodies”. Paul was telling them in no uncertain terms that the goal of the race of faith – heaven – would be far more glorious than any earthly price!

*Nanda conducting interview with Nehan:*

The image we would like to focus on today, is that of pressing on towards the goal... As André explained to you earlier, in our reading Paul is probably referring to running a race, but I would like to illustrate to you what this means, by referring to an actual goal – a football goal, to be precise!

Our youngest son, Nehan, loves playing football! And this morning I'm going to have a wee interview with him:

- Nehan, can you please tell me – what is the ultimate goal of playing a football match?

*To score a goal.*

- Can you please illustrate to us how to score a goal?

*Thanks Nehan!*

- Is it always that easy?

*No... Good goalkeeper can be an obstacle.*

- Please tell me Nehan: What is the secret to winning a football match?

*Teamwork!*

*Nanda:*

Teamwork. Football players are part of a team. They all work together to score a goal. Even if they have the best striker in the whole wide world, he won't be able to score a goal if his team doesn't get the ball to him when he is in the best spot.

Something else that motivates footballers, is the crowds supporting them. We heard in the news how awkward the professional players were finding it when initially they started playing football again without supporters due to lockdown restrictions.

The aim of a football match is to score as many goals as possible. If you score more goals than the opposing team, your team will win the match.

So during a game footballers have to think on their feet, act fast, and focus. They can't be thinking about anything else apart from what is going on on the field at that very moment, if they get distracted it can have catastrophic consequences.

They need to keep their eyes on the ball at all times.

And you know – the exact same thing is true about life. We need to live in the moment. And we need to keep our eyes on the ball. And strive towards scoring that goal.

To me, in life, the ball is our faith: The single most important thing in our lives. Just like there can't be a football game without a ball, life without faith just doesn't make sense at all.

The moment you step onto the pitch of life, you are part of the team of believers. Each one of us have a different position to play, but every single one of us has a purpose, we are *needed* for the game to be a success.

The crowds supporting us are all those who have done this before us, our predecessors in faith – the people we read about in the Bible, all the way through history until our very own family members who have played their part and are with God now, cheering us on.

The difference between an actual football game and life as a Christian, is that every single person who believes in God has room on the pitch. Not only a selected few.

But we still have to train and work hard in order to be able to give our best.

How can we do this? Well – the Bible is our rule book – we need to make sure we read it often, understand the rules and adhere to it.

Our fellow Christians are our teammates, and we should support and encourage each other all the time. We should trust each other, and look out for each other, because we all have the same goal.

We shouldn't dwell in the past, but focus on what lies ahead of us, like Paul explained so nicely in his letter to the Philippians. And just like that brought him joy, it will bring *us* joy too.

Now I'm sure that you will agree with me that since the end of March this game just got a whole lot more complicated than it usually is. Not as if it was easy to start with!

Now the goalposts keep shifting. We just get used to something and then the guidelines change, and we have to readjust. Thank goodness God made us to be versatile and flexible!

The thing is, we can't stop playing. If we get exhausted or injured, we can get some time out during which the medics will see to our needs, but ultimately, we need to get back on that pitch.

Because that is why we are here. To play. To live!

And if we do this right – if we focus on our faith, forget about all the mistakes we made in the past and don't have sleepless nights about our worries for what the future holds, but just focus on what we have to do NOW, and do it in the way Jesus taught us to – humble and loving and caring and supporting – we will find that same joy in our hearts that Paul tells us about in his letter. A joy that is not dependent on what is happening around us, but a joy that comes from deep within, a joy rooted in the knowledge that no matter what happens to us, we are safe in the hands of God. For all eternity.

So let's play our hearts out – because although the goalposts keep shifting while we are here on earth – our ultimate goal is to one day be with God, and nothing – not even a worldwide pandemic – can change that.

Amen

## **HYMN**

### **CH4 396:1-5**

- 1 And can it be that I should gain  
An int'rest in the Savior's blood?  
Died He for me, who caused His pain?  
For me, who Him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! how can it be  
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?  
Amazing love! how can it be  
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?
- 2 'Tis mystery all! The Immortal dies!

Who can explore His strange design?

In vain the firstborn seraph tries

To sound the depths of love Divine!

'Tis mercy all! let earth adore,

Let angel minds inquire no more.

'Tis mercy all! let earth adore,

Let angel minds inquire no more.

3 He left His Father's throne above,

So free, so infinite His grace;

Emptied Himself of all but love,

And bled for Adam's helpless race:

'Tis mercy all, immense and free;

For, O my God, it found out me.

'Tis mercy all, immense and free;

For, O my God, it found out me.

4 Long my imprisoned spirit lay

Fast bound in sin and nature's night;

Thine eye diffused a quickening ray,

I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;

My chains fell off, my heart was free,

I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

My chains fell off, my heart was free,

I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

5 No condemnation now I dread;

Jesus, and all in Him, is mine!

Alive in Him, my living Head,

And clothed in righteousness Divine,

Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.  
Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.