

Philippians 1:1-18a and Luke 9:46-48

Lord, take my words and speak through them, take our thoughts and think through them, take our hearts & set them on fire with love for you. Amen.

Introduction

Ben and Jerry. Rolls and Royce. Morecambe and Wise. Watson and Crick. Lennon and McCartney.

There are some really great partnerships around!

(And, of course, many successful partnerships are made up of several people rather than just two.)

We often have a tendency to focus on individuals. We might well admire people like Elon Musk, Bill Gates or Richard Branson – individuals who've fought their way to the top, apparently single-handedly and against all the odds.

But these kind of success stories are misleading. Because behind each successful individual there's usually a team – and it's the team that really counts.

Think of the world of medicine, for example. We remember the names of people like Christiaan Barnard, who carried out the first successful heart transplant; or Magdi Yacoub, who carried out more transplants than any other surgeon in the world.

But patients undergoing an operation require more than just a surgeon. Anaesthetists, nurses and surgeons must all work together and use their individual specialities as a team to successfully perform a procedure.

I think the apostle Paul recognised this when he wrote to the Philippians and said that, in his prayers for all of them, he always prayed with joy because of their partnership in the gospel.

Partners in the Gospel

But what does this mean? What does it mean to be partners in the gospel?

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At the end of January, Mike and I moved house – out to Deerness. One of the things that amazed me about living there was the huge number of geese!

Now, I know that geese are considered something of a pest, but we can learn a lot from the way they fly – in that familiar V-shaped formation. I'd like to mention two things in particular:

- The first is that, when geese fly together, each goose provides additional lift and reduces air resistance for the goose flying behind it. As a result, by flying

together in a v-formation, scientists estimate that the whole flock can fly about 70% farther with the same amount of energy than if each goose flew alone! Geese have discovered that they can reach their destination more quickly and using less energy when they fly together in formation.

- The second thing is that geese help each other. Scientists have discovered that when one goose becomes ill, is shot or injured, and drops out of the formation, two other geese will fall out of formation and remain with the weakened goose. They'll stay with the injured goose and protect it from predators until it is able to fly again or dies.

Similar principles apply in the church. When we work together in partnership – sharing common values and a common destination – we accomplish so much more, because we're lifted up by the energy and enthusiasm of one another.

And churches work best when they do more than just work together, but genuinely care for the well-being of each other.

The essence of partnership is doing together what we can't do alone. It's a case of Together Everyone Achieves More.

It's a truth that is found throughout scripture:

- In Ecclesiastes 4:9-10, Solomon makes the wise observation that *"Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labour. If either of them falls down, one can help the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help them up."*
- Jesus knew the value of partnership when he called his disciples – and when he sent those disciples out in twos.
- And when Paul began his missionary journeys, he didn't go alone – he always had a partner, someone like Barnabas, or Silas, or Timothy.

Thanks

But good partnerships need to be nurtured. They need encouragement. And Paul provides this in his letter to the Philippians.

There was a real bond of friendship between Paul and the Philippian Church – it was by far the church he felt closest to.

There's a great deal of affection evident in this letter to the Philippians, and that affection is based on Paul's knowledge of how God is at work in and through their fellowship.

In the letter, Paul affirms his belief in the Philippians – his belief that, no matter where he finds himself or where they may find themselves, this is a faith community

that supports and affirms the gospel with him. (And it's maybe worth reminding ourselves that, when Paul is writing this letter, he's in prison awaiting death, and the Philippian church is experiencing persecution.)

Paul also thanks the church for all that they've done for him (how often do we remember to thank those who work with and for us in the church???), and assures them of his prayers for them.

And the focus of his prayer is "*that your love may abound more and more*" (v9).

Love

The love that Paul is speaking about here isn't a sentimental thing. It's a deep and passionate commitment. In fact, the word that's translated as 'love' in this passage is the Greek word ἀγάπη (agape) – and agape love involves faithfulness, commitment, and an act of the will. Agape love is beautifully described in 1 Corinthians 13; and it's agape love that Jesus talks about in John 15:9-13 when he gives his disciples the command to "Love one another as I have loved you".

Paul's prayer for the Philippian church is that this deep and passionate commitment to love might overflow with "*knowledge and insight*" (v9). This is a prayer that their love might be right-sighted – that they might be wise, sensible and thoughtful in their actions.

The news over the last couple of weeks has been full of stories that describe the implications of us loving or not loving each other:

- There's been huge optimism over the possibility of cooperation between North and South Korea, as the respective leaders met and symbolically stood together on both sides of the border before beginning discussions about dismantling the North's nuclear capabilities. The dividing of North and South Korea split families apart and has kept them apart for decades.
- But there was also the resignation of Amber Rudd as Home Secretary as a result of the treatment of the 'Windrush generation'; and there was the anger in the borough of Kensington (where Grenfell Tower still stands) ahead of the local government elections last Thursday. In both cases, there's political fall-out from a perceived lack of love, and the feeling that individuals' needs have been put second to political expediency.

The kind of love that Paul prays for is demanding; it presents us with challenges. It's a call to love God and neighbour no matter what – Jesus said: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23).

But Paul prays that the Philippians' love might overflow more and more – because to love more is to share in the gospel more, and to strengthen the partnership more.

Conclusion

In this letter to the Philippians, Paul is addressing a community who are deeply committed to the cause of the gospel, and actively share in defending and confirming the gospel. He expresses his confidence in them because he is sure that they'll continue along this road. He's also confident that, as they do so, God will work powerfully in their lives to change and transform them, causing love to overflow from them.

Would Paul have the same confidence in us?

To be honest, I'm not sure that he'd have that kind of confidence in me. But I take some reassurance from verse 6: "*he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion*".

God is always working to make us into the kind of people He wants us to be. May we be open to the changes and transformations he has in mind for us; and may we be ready to be partners in the gospel.

Amen.