

Philippians 1:3-11

"I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, ⁶ being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

⁷ It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. ⁸ God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

⁹ And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God."

Tell me, how many of you still write an annual Christmas letter to send to your family and friends?

The days of receiving a pile of them in the letterbox each morning in the weeks before Christmas and spending two hours reading about the lives of others every evening are disappearing, and those who write long Christmas letters are becoming a dying breed!

I've received one so far, from a pastor-friend, who always remembers us, and he gave me permission to share some of it with you today.

As he reflected on 2024 he wrote about an overseas trip, caravanning around Australia, a significant wedding anniversary, and he doted over their growing number of grandchildren and their achievements.

They had much to be thankful for, and he was.

But then he wrote about the life-threatening illness that his wife had recently been diagnosed with, and the ongoing, life changing treatment which has upended their daily lives and their plans for the future.

Near the end of their letter he writes this:

"We are walking a road we have not travelled before. Apart from the ultimate destination, it is a road with unfamiliar twists and turns, and many potholes..... We are walking this road together, hand in hand. This isn't a road we would have chosen, but it is the one we are on.

We continue to live in faith, hope and love. The important things haven't changed.

We can't do many things that were part of our 'normal' until just a couple of months ago. But that is also in God's hands. In any case our earthly sojourn, as we all know, won't be forever.

Meanwhile whatever God calls us to, is his will for us at this time. It isn't always easy, sometimes it is bloody painful, but with that we are still at peace. God's will be done, because we know Jesus. We know who and whose we are. And that lasts forever.

Please continue to pray for (my wife's complete healing and our patience in the journey ahead. And pray for wisdom in discerning what our current callings are, apart from the one of loving and caring for each other. [We already know that.]"

- **Thanks** to God,
- **Confidence** in God when facing an uncertain future, and
- **Prayer** that God would not only take care of them but give them the wisdom to discern how to best live their lives now, as an expression of his love for them and their love for him.

That about sums up my pastor-friend's letter.

And it also sums up the opening to the letter we just heard read from another pastor - St Paul, to the church, both back then in Philippi, and the church today because we have been copied into it too.

1. Pastor Paul gives thanks to God.

I thank my God every time I remember you. ⁴ In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy ⁵ because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now,

⁷..... I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. ⁸ God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Whenever Paul thought about this church family he was always thankful and joyful. This church was often on his mind, they were close to his heart, and he looked at them through the eyes of Jesus, and with all the affection of Jesus who gave up his life for them.

That was true whatever his personal circumstances – he says whether he was chained up in prison (like he was now) for his faith, or whether he was riding a ministry wave. Sitting in chains in prison he didn't curl up in a ball thinking "woe is me" – rather he thought of them. And **"Every time"** he remembered them he thanked God for them, and he **"always"** prayed with joy.

And his thankfulness for this congregation of Christians wasn't gazumped by what was going on in the church. This church, like all the churches Paul wrote to wasn't perfect – none are. (If you go looking for the perfect church to meet your every need and expectation you will end up in a church of one, and you might not like that one because you would be the only one left in it!)

Pastor Paul was conscious of, and had to write to that congregation about selfishness and division, complaining and fault-finding, and the threat to their faith as false teachers got into their ears.

But the flavour and tone of his "remembering" of this church was thankfulness and joy in them. And he especially thanked God **"because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now"**

- Paul remembered the beginnings of the congregation – how God brought them to faith in Jesus and how God had given him a part in that as he shared the gospel with them. It cost him a spell in prison back then too but that didn't colour his memory of the beginnings of their faith in the Good News of Jesus Christ.
- He was conscious that even after he had heard God's call to move on and start other congregations that these poor people had kept on supporting his ministry and had just sent a gift to him by the hand of one of their members.
- But deeper than that, Pastor Paul says he was especially thankful that **"all of you share in God's grace with me"**. God's undeserved overwhelming kindness and forgiving love in Jesus Christ is what had saved each one of them individually, what brought them together, and had kept them together as God's church, even though there were some divisions among them and some threats to what was being taught among them.

We are part of and participate in God's church by his grace to us in Jesus too. As Christians we are partners in, participate in, share in, and enjoy together the Good News of God that comes to us personally in Jesus Christ, the gift we are about to celebrate

together at Christmas. And for our partnership in the gospel here at St Pauls I trust that you too are truly thankful to God as you remember your church today.

2. Pastor Paul expresses confidence in God

⁶ being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Last week our now "ex" Vicar Shaun preached on his favourite text from chapter 3 of Philippians. There Paul reflects on how he used to have confidence in himself and his own goodness and law-keeping, his religious upbringing, and the mark of circumcision, but not any longer. Now he saw all that as garbage when compared to the gift of righteousness from God in Jesus. Now his only confidence and hope came from Christ.

And as he thought about the congregation he was writing to and its future Paul's confidence and faith rested in God for them too. It didn't depend on him as a pastor or on them as members, but on God and his work among them.

Every congregation is a "work in progress" – God's WIP.

So Pastor Paul trusts this congregation to God who had brought them to faith and brought them together in the first place. God would finish what he had started in them.

I wonder what your hope for the church is today, and where your confidence about that lies, assuming you are confident about the future of God's church... You are confident, aren't you?

3. Pastor Paul prays for wisdom to know how best to live for God.

This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, ¹⁰ so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.

How best to live for God now, at this time and these circumstances, that's what Paul prayed for this congregation, it's what my pastor friend asked us to pray for him and his wife, and it's what we pray for each other and all Christians as church today.

Whatever happens in 2025, whatever our own personal path ahead might be or for our congregation (and let's face it, both we and pastor Matt and his family are in a space of uncertainty as this year closes off and 2025 is coming at us fast..... Whatever happens, and with confidence in God, with Pastor Paul we pray for our **"love to abound more and more"**.

"Discerning love", "wise love", "what is best" love, "best practice" love - a love that comes from the mind and heart of Christ (as in chapter 2 of Philippians), a life of love that honours God and brings glory to him as we live together in this congregation and as our witness to him in the world. Love that is the fruit of Christ living his life in us and through us to the glory of God.

For Christians love isn't simply doing what feels right, but what we know is right, what we know is right as with the Spirit's help we discern God's word, on our own and together. His word informs our love and how we express it in the way we live.

And where we aren't sure which way to go or don't know what God wants us to do next, we even more pray for wisdom and love to exercise as we discern the pathway to go together in faith, hope and love.

Pastor Paul urges the church to aim to live a life of love that is found to be blameless when Christ returns – now that's aiming high! We will never be "blameless" this side of his coming again. We will always be a "work in progress", God's WIP, all the while relying on the grace we share in Jesus, but we are urged to aim for it anyway with his Spirit's help, remembering we are not loved because of our "progress" or lack of it.

When he wrote his Christmas letter my pastor-friend was conscious of time and what his wife's illness might mean for their time together.

When he wrote his letter Pastor Paul was conscious of time too. Conscious that since he was in prison, his time on earth might be short. He was also conscious of the **"Day of Christ"** - the day when Christ returns and gathers us up to God in heaven forever.

Either way, whether he dies first or the Lord returns first, he and we can't lose. Both he and we get on with living thankful lives, "God confident" lives, and lives of wise-love that give witness to the one who has saved us and brought us together.

So, if you were to write a Christmas letter to your family and friends reflecting on 2024 and thinking ahead to 2025 I wonder what you would write this year?

And what would you write in a Christmas letter to your church family – here at St Pauls, or to the LCA? What would you write to - “us”?

If you struggle for inspiration (and even if you don't), might I suggest you reflect during the week on the letter we heard from Pastor Paul to the church today, and the letter my friend and his wife sent to us. Letters:

- Expressing thanks to God,
- Expressing confidence in God as we face an uncertain future, and
- Praying that God would give us the wisdom to discern how to best live our lives of love now, whatever our personal or church circumstances, as an expression of his love for us and love for Him, all while we wait for the “**Day of Christ**” – however and whenever that day might come for us.