

Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse Sunday 1st July 2007 Philippians 4:1-3

Recently I had to give a short talk at a local school on 'The Joy of Friendship'. The reason that friendsreunited.com and the 'Friends' TV show have become so popular is because friendship is the highest joy for a human being.

In ancient times there was more written about friendship than anything else. But in all the text books on this subject in the classical world there is never any mention of the Apostle Paul; this is strange because you cannot get any higher in terms of affection and friendship than this letter to the Philippians. It was written to a Church which was founded amongst a number of women at the riverside, and which then moved to Lydia's house. This is a relationship of incredible mutual love between the Church and Paul. He, like the best Christian pastors, has fallen in love with this Church. He says 'my brothers', 'my sisters', 'you whom I love and long for', 'beloved'.

In ancient times if you wanted to shame your enemies you would not name them. Unlike today when we name and shame people who have done wrong, to name someone meant that they were part of Paul's friendship group. To confess Jesus as Lord is to put yourself in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. When Jesus was presented to the crowd after his trial, the crowd shouted 'If you let this man go, you are no friend of Caesar's'. And if you follow this man Jesus you become His friend, His companion, from the Latin 'cum' = 'with', 'panis' = bread, meaning to eat bread with.

The fellowship was being threatened by two women, Euodia and Syntyche, who had fallen out. Paul describes them as fellow-workers, who were carrying responsibilities in the Church. They were disagreeing most probably about how to 'do' the gospel in Philippi: perhaps one of them wanted to adopt the practices of the Judaisers in order to fend off persecution. Paul urges them to show humility.

Unity is corporate humility. Show me a relationship problem and I will show you someone who has not learned humility. There is nothing uglier, nothing more detrimental to the Church's evangelism than disunity. Disagreement threatens not only the fellowship, but makes them a bad advert for the Church, for the Church is called to be a colony of heaven, a living illustration of heaven. The 'eschaton' is the age to come, when God will rule. In the death of Jesus Christ that age to come has broken in to the present time, and the Church is a demonstration of that age to come. The gospel is like a divine time-warp. The future judgement has been transferred into the past, to the death of Christ, and the future world has been settled.

So the Church is living the life of the future – now. The Church is a colony of heaven, its outpost, its shop window, a visual demonstration of what it is like to live in heaven. In the book of life as Paul calls it, you live in that world, living the future, now.

To live with disunity is to deny the fellowship, to deny the truth of the gospel, to live as if the future has not broken in, as if the gospel is not true.

Now it is a given that the Church is a messy community, but in the tensions and disagreements, it is how you resolve it that's important, and how you work to maintain the unity.