

Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse - Sunday November 19th 2006 World Focus Sunday: Philippians 2:19-30 ~ Gamblers for God

One of the reasons that I considered coming to Millmead was because of the huge involvement of this Church in Missions. Indeed after a wonderful Missions Awayday in Alton earlier this month, I have returned even more enthused! There are some obvious texts for a Missions Sunday such as the Great Commission in Matthew 28, but I would say that every text could serve for this morning. Set in the context of God's mission, every Sunday could be Missions Sunday.

These epistles are not written in the seminary, or by denominational boards, but by men and women on the move, planting churches, being persecuted and even martyred. Even 1 Timothy is not so much a homily but a letter written to one of the apostles, to warn him against false teaching being spread in one of the churches they had planted. In the New Testament we do not have mission boards, but a vision of friends in ministry, rooted in a strong Christian community, in fellowship as fellow-workers, not functionaries.

As the church gives away in sending people overseas, to prisons, to East London, so it becomes a receiving church. 2 Corinthians v 6: he who sows generously will reap generously. As we have sent people, given effort, time and prayer, then God is blessing us in our youth work, our worship, in our outreach. It is not a coincidence. Grace goes out, and then comes in. Right at the heart of a sending church lies not a manual, telling us how to be a big church, or to have a strategy to be a sending church, but an attitude and a passion of a few unsung heroes modelling what it is to follow Jesus Christ.

In this text (Philippians 2:19-30), Paul is in prison again for the gospel. He is writing to Philippi to tell them to stop arguing, to consider others better than themselves, that their attitude should be that of Christ (Philippians 2). Timothy in serving the church was serving the interests of Christ. And then he turns to Epaphroditus, who gambled his life – *paraboleusamenos*(Gk): *to hazard one's life* – as he brought the gift to Paul and thus brought the love of the Church. Every time we send a missionary, or money, it is a priestly offering, acceptable to God. Paul says to welcome him, honour him, because he gambled his life and almost died. This word, *paraboleusamenos*, that Paul has invented, was picked up by the early church and used in the word Parabolani to describe a group of Christians who risked their lives by burying the dead during a plague in Carthage in AD 252, and in so doing the plague was stopped.

Where are the dreamers, the risk-takers? Who will model what it means to follow Christ? Most people are mummified by the time they are 30. The popularity of a current best-seller entitled 'Dangerous Stuff for Boys' shows that the world is desperate for risk-takers.

When Paul used the word gambler about Epaphroditus he was probably thinking of the gamblers who called out the word "epaphroditos" – favourite of Aphrodite, the goddess of gamblers, hoping to have some luck in the throwing of the dice. His name was linked with the world of gambling, and now he had become like his name, a gambler for Christ, throwing his life away.

This is not just for boys, but for men and women such as Paul lists in Romans 16. I met on Friday a friend of Simon Walsh whose church is taking risks for the gospel in Colombia. He told me stories of their courage and bravery.

I wonder if one of the reasons that we don't take risks is the fear of failure. Well as Christians we can't live like that – to live without risk is to risk not living; to be at ease is to be unsafe;

In closing, here is a poem:

Peter,

Had I

Followed him as eagerly
Served him as loyally
Loved him as utterly
Agreed to die with him as willingly
As you
Then denied him thrice
I would weep when the roosters crow
But
Because I have done all things conservatively
And have not faced death at all
I have neither wept
Nor been tenderly restored
And called a rock

So next time you say goodbye to someone don't say 'Take care', but 'Take a risk'!