

**Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> March 2018**  
**Evensong**  
**Lent 3 (B)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Exodus 5.1-6.1**  
**NT: Philippians 3. 4b-14**

A story is told of the great 19th century Anglican priest and poet, John Keble. As a young don in Oxford, in the early 1800's, he was appointed college bursar. Few clergy then, or now for that matter, were trained in the art of balancing columns of figures; and in one particular year, so the story goes, Keble's accounts were out by nearly £2,000 . Eventually the mystery was solved. Having written the date at the top of the page, he had inadvertently added in the number of the year, somewhere near 1820 - into one of the columns of figures.

We are all very aware with the various scandals we hear about from the banking world, that there are many methods of creative accounting, but normally balancing the books is a matter of putting together a certain number of items on the credit side, and usually a large number of things on the debit side, and then calculating them to see how close they come.

In a real sense, this is exactly what Paul is doing in the passage we have heard from Philippians this evening, as he uses accounting as a metaphor. However, Paul's accounts balance in a very odd way, and I will look at that later. Firstly let's consider the circumstances that Paul is in, circumstances that make the letter to tone of the letter the more remarkable. Philippians is one of Paul's prison epistles. He wrote it while being held in chains, nearly forgot- ten in a sluggish legal system, awaiting a trial to determine whether he would live or die.

He makes repeated mention of his imprisonment, He speaks of the imperial guard who were assigned to keep him confined. He ponders what the life or death verdict might mean The biblical record itself strongly suggests that Philippians was written from Rome during the first of Paul's two imprisonments there. And the details given in the epistle itself harmonize perfectly with Luke's words in the final verses of the book of Acts.

There we learn that Paul was held in Rome under house arrest, most likely chained constantly to a Roman guard, for "two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance".

And yet Philippians is the sunniest of Paul's epistles. Its dominant theme is joy.

Notes of joy sound through the epistle from beginning to end, and the theme reaches its pinnacle with a triumphant double imperative in Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice!"

Paul's gladness simply overwhelms whatever pathos we might expect to dominate an epistle penned from prison. It's a joy that is real and heartfelt, deep and palpable.

So back to the accounts of Paul.

You will recall how he declares that in terms of his status, as a member of God's people, Israel, he has nothing on the debit side at all!

"Circumcised on the eighth day,

a member of the people of Israel,

of the tribe of Benjamin,

a Hebrew born of Hebrews;

as to the law, a Pharisee;

as to zeal, a persecutor of the church;  
as to righteousness under the law, blameless."

Does this mean though that his account with God is in credit? Certainly Not! Paul strikes a line through all the items that looked as if they formed a credit balance, and then places the whole lot on the debit side.

What has caused this extraordinary piece of what might be called 'destructive accounting'? Simply this: Paul has discovered something to put on the credit side in comparison with which, everything else he can imagine can only be a debit. The something is in fact of course not a thing, but rather Jesus, the Messiah, the king, the Jesus whom Paul has already described to us if we had read the letter from the beginning as the one who:

"though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death even death on a cross.

Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." Chapter 2 v 6

That poem in fact remains absolutely crucial, because what Paul goes on to say about himself and what should be true for us today in our lives as we seek to follow Christ must reflect exactly what those words speak of.

Jesus didn't regard the huge advantage he had - equality with God no less - as something to exploit, rather, he interpreted it as the vocation to die on the cross, and that is why God exalted him.

And so Paul doesn't regard the huge privileges he had as something to take advantage of, rather he discovered in Jesus that the true meaning of membership in God's people lay in suffering and death, with the hope of the resurrection beyond.

Therefore having the Messiah in his life means that he is in profit. Jesus as Israel's Messiah has at last done what Israel, for all her privileged position as God's chosen people, had not and could not. Jesus has been in himself the Light of the World, the means of salvation, the doorway to the age to come. Israel, meanwhile, including Paul himself before his conversion on the Damascus Road, had been struggling to be God's people, setting up the law as a barrier of privilege between Jew and Gentile. That's why Paul now sees, and says, that what he wants is none of the privileges of the Jews but rather to gain the Messiah, to know Jesus, to be found in him, to be defined by the Messiah's faithfulness, to know the power of his resurrection, which means following the road that Jesus took along the road of conflict, suffering and death. Paul tells us that God regards all Christians as being 'ev christo', in Christ. Not just a knowledge of Jesus, but being in a personal relationship with him, living out a life that conforms to the patterns of behaviour we see in Jesus own self sacrifice. Whatever that might mean for us - for some it will be a literal and physical persecution, while for others it may be a more hidden and subtle thing. When we are in Christ we should remember that our account with God is always in credit - better to have the Messiah, and to follow him through the cross to the resurrection than to end up with nothing at all.

Our age has given us a plethora of amenities and conveniences that Paul could never have even imagined. Yet our daily lives are fast-paced, hectic, and full of trouble and stress. Real joy is a rare commodity in civilized Western culture. Sadly, even most of the visible church is hardly a bastion of genuine joy. We desperately need the message Paul gave the church at Philippi. There are, of course, notes of rebuke, correction, and urgent warning in Philippians, but Paul always returns to the message of joy. So the epistle runs the gamut of human passions, but always finds resolution by returning to the keynote of joy. It is both astonishing and personally inspiring that such indefatigable joy dominated the heart, mind, and teaching of the apostle Paul even after all those years of suffering.

The book of Philippians is written for that very purpose—to point us to that joy. Surely, there is not a one of us who does not need to know more of the supernatural joy of the Lord in our lives.

Fr Bill Addy