

What would Jesus do?

A sermon prepared by Rev Canon Andrew Wright, Secretary General, Mission to Seafarers for the Sixteenth Sunday of Trinity 27 Sunday 2020

Refs: Ezekiel 18.1-4.25-end; Philippians 2.1-13; Matthew 21.23-32

Paul's letters can be hard work. While there are wonderful sublimities, they are often short on stories, long on theology and demand an in-depth understanding of the contemporary cultural background (to help us understand his approach to women and slavery for example). Paul himself can sometimes seem grim and uncompromising with a seeming penchant for risky confrontation, a rather testy lack of patience in the shortcomings of colleagues and the kind of unwavering faith with which we can find it hard to identify.

And yet there are always points of connection. In today's Epistle he writes from prison. 40 years ago, I spent some time as an inmate in prison. In that I can find some personal empathy. It was December, just before Christmas and I was admitted for two weeks. Before you get too worried, I did so voluntarily as part of my preparations for ordination. You could never do it now - it would never pass the risk assessment! I arrived one evening, was given the prison clothes and taken to my cell. My fellow inmates knew nothing about my arrival, and I was left to introduce myself. I lived the full prison life, including having a torch shone in my eyes every hour at night to make sure I was still alive. I ate the terrible food (including the porridge!) I did prison work. I witnessed some brutal fights, one suicide attempt and one failed attempt at escape. I played in probably the most violent football match I have ever encountered. And I spent much time talking to my fellow prisoners and hearing their stories. I touched something of the darkness of so many of their lives, and counted it a privilege to do so. I learnt something, even in two weeks as a voluntary inmate, of that complete loss of control over your own destiny, over your own life, that total inability to make choices, the desperate gulf between you and your loved ones. I was I can tell you, very glad to get back for a Davenant Road Christmas.

In recent months I have been reflecting on the connections between life in prison and life for seafarers in the current pandemic. Up to 400,000 are now working long beyond their contract ends because crew change is so difficult- some up to 17 months at sea now – and when in ports most shore leave is cancelled. Uncertainty, worry about family and exhaustion are huge issues. They are in a difficult place and completely trapped on their vessels, many unable even to leave at the end of what some might be feeling are their "sentences".

Perhaps there also parallels with many of our own "lockdown" circumstances. There are restrictions on our movements and choices. Access to family and friends is curtailed. Many of our normal freedoms are lost. Some wake up fearful. The "whens" and "hows" of the end of it all are unknown. And it is not just the virus. Global threats in various forms seems to be within touching distance. A kind of madness seems to be closing in and we feel, perhaps as rarely before, the loss of control of our own destinies, our own futures. There is no surprise in the wave of mental health issues sweeping across the world. Our Mission to Seafarers chaplains speak of a mental health epidemic paralleling the virus pandemic. Some seafarers have committed suicide. We have seen a similar story in our own community, our streets, even our own homes.

Paul's lockdown, prison lockdown, seafarer lockdown, our own lockdown.

Philippians is written from lockdown. Two Pauline imprisonments are mentioned in Acts, one in Caesarea and one in Rome. Many have surmised, however, that there was a third imprisonment, during his time in Ephesus. I make the assumption that this letter was written from prison there, a

city in which he also experienced considerable challenges which you can read about in Acts. The Second letter to the Corinthians, written probably slightly later but after release, reflects bluntly on something of a bleak time for him. It suggests that Paul knew plenty about mental health crisis. “We do not want you to be ignorant”, he writes, “of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed, that we despaired of life itself”. This coming from one of the greatest Christians of all time, one whose life transformed the world. Surely for many this is a point of contact, especially perhaps in these difficult times.

Whatever it was that had led to the despair expressed in 2 Corinthians is not apparent in the letter to the Philippians. Indeed, later in 2 Corinthians it is made clear that Paul has overcome the terrors he once felt. Philippians is an optimistic, warm letter, full of determination, hope, and thankfulness. The legitimate question with which to come to this passage might be around encouragement. Where did Paul find his strength? How did he bounce back from the many sufferings he faced? How does he turn his “crushing despair” into something more positive? What are his lessons from lockdown?

One very basic thing is to reflect on the whole context of the epistle. It is a thankyou letter. Paul has received a gift in prison from the Philippians, brought to him by Epaphroditus, a “fragrant offering” Paul calls it. That is enough in itself to have given him a lockdown bounce. How vital it is when we are in dark places to feel the love and value of others. I recently heard someone speaking of his Christian faith in the midst of an appallingly debilitating disease. “How do you experience God’s love in all this?”, he was asked. “Through my family and friends and their care for me”, he said. How vital and transformational is our dedicated care for one another and for those in our community and beyond. To do so is to bring God into the midst.

But what other clues are there to his surviving and thriving mechanisms?

Firstly, I suggest there is **creativity**. In this chapter we have one of the greatest of Paul’s passages. Many think he quotes an existing Christian hymn. I wonder actually, especially given the likely date of this letter, if it is a poem that arises out of his own reflections. You can almost feel his sense of thrill in the cell as he pens these words, writing of the Jesus “who emptied himself, and received the form of a slave....who humbled himself, and became obedient even to death.....And so God has greatly exalted him....that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow.” Whether or not Paul created this hymn, it is certain that he used his time in prison to think, reflect and create – and still his created words are amongst the globally most read and most transformational. He uses the space to do what in this chapter he urges on others – “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” What opportunities lockdown can bring for creative and productive thinking and activity.

Secondly, **community**. He looks outward and not inward. “Let each of you”, he says, “look not only to your own interests but to the interests of others”. In prison Paul is constantly thinking about the scattered Christian communities he has founded, about their needs. He thinks about those who are his captors. The heart of his thinking lies with them and he does not brood on the uncertainties and privations of his own situation.

Thirdly, **context**. Paul keeps his mind on the bigger picture, of a world which is ultimately in God’s hands. The God of Jesus who was there at the start of history, walks with us through history and waits for us at the end of history. He believes that one day this will all make sense and, as he says here, “every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Finally, **Christ**. Paul uses his time to seek to understand and follow the mind of Christ.

“If there is any encouragement in Christ”, he writes, “any incentive of love.....any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind”. There was a phase some years ago for young Christians to wear wrist bands saying WWJD. What would Jesus do? Rather trite and simplistic many might have thought. But in reality, perhaps WWJD holds a simple truth that Paul would have approved. In all our thinking, in lockdown and beyond, it is a vital question to ask as we try in our own small ways to follow Jesus, live his values and build the world anew. This theme is echoed in our Gospel story where Jesus refuses to give his hearers easy answers to their questions. Rather, he implies, look at what you see and hear and make up your own minds about what it means for you.

So, Paul may have had some concerns about the lockdown therapies many currently pursue – box sets, booze, buying on-line and Boris (dwelling too much on his behaviours, competencies and likely next moves may not be good for the soul). Instead of the Bs try the Cs, Creativity, Community, Context ...and Christ! Amen.