

"THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
January 17, 1988

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TEXT: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

Philippians 1: 21

INTRODUCTION

Some great literature has been written from behind prison walls, most recently Martin Luther King's, Letter From a Birmingham Jail, which it has been said marked a turning point in the civil rights movement. In many ways it was a political tract, but it also revealed that a person could be free in prison.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran German Pastor imprisoned during World War II wrote Letters and Notes From Prison which were smuggled out of the prison, collected and one day published after the war. They were small letters and notes not meant for publication at all, but that little volume caused much excitement in the theological world, again revealing that a soul can be free in prison.

John Bunyan, you may recall, wrote from prison; his prison work was entitled, Grace Abounding which sounds a bit like the Apostle Paul, and is probably no accident because Paul is the first of the prison writers and his Letter to the Philippians is one of the great ones. It's a theological letter and that's why it found its way into the New Testament. But, it's also the testimony of a man who found a new freedom even while sitting behind prison bars.

Philippians will be our text for the next few weeks as we walk through its four chapters. I commend it to you for reading this week. Let's look at the first chapter today in our time together.

BACKGROUND

First, a bit of background. Paul is probably in Rome when he writes to the Philippians. He says that he is under the Praetorian guard. And the Praetorian guard was stationed only in imperial cities. There were other imperial cities, but we think he was in Rome. It's near the end if he is in Rome and Paul knew it was getting near the end for him. And so, too, does this little Church at Philippi which Paul founded. One senses a special bond between these folks in Philippi and Paul - a rich fellowship that comes only through the years of a maturing and deepening love and trust.

They had sent Epaphroditus, one of the members, to Rome to see him and to give him a gift that would show their concern. We don't know what the gift was. Maybe it was a cake with a file in it; we don't know. But at any rate, Paul does the right thing and writes a thank you letter to the Philippians.

And it is full of affection, warm and personal. It's not some of his other letters written to churches where he instructs and preaches and sometimes even condemns. There's little of that in this letter. He says, "I thank God for you...I am always praying for you and giving thanks. I hold you in my heart because you are partners of the same grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense of the Gospel". Which means they have always stood by him. That's the kind of relationship they had. And so Paul concludes the salutation with these most personal words, "...and how I yearn for you with the affection of Jesus Christ."

Now it's not like Paul to talk that way - not to his churches. He usually starts out by saying, "Grace and peace to you through Jesus Christ" - which was a formal salutation and then he gets right into the business at hand. And sometimes it's rough business. But this letter is no business letter and so the salutation is long and warm and affectionate.

HOW'S IT GOING, PAUL?

They want to know how he is getting along in prison, and so he assures them, "I want you to know that what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole Praetorian guard that my imprisonment is for Christ." And what that probably means is that the guards had to stand there and listen to Paul preach a sermon. So Paul wasn't the prisoner! The guards were the prisoners. They had to stand at attention and listen to him; they couldn't leave. If they did, they would be disciplined. "What has happened" said Paul, "to me has really served to advance the Gospel". You see Paul was assuming that God had sent all those Romans to him one by one. Every eight hours he had a new one to preach to. I guess there are those who would say it was a preacher's dream - a captive audience. The news had spread throughout the entire Praetorian guard, he said....I bet it had, too, though Paul probably didn't know what they were saying about him.

And that's the way he starts this letter. He reassures the Philippians, who thought he must be suffering in prison, that he can see the providence of God in what has happened to him.

So, he's getting a chance to practice what he has always preached. He's always preached the providence of God. Remember how years before he had penned that wonderful line to the Romans, "All things work together for good to those who love God, who are called according to His purpose". Now he's proving it.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD

And this, I think, is one of Paul's great themes. Providence means that God controls the events. It doesn't mean that God causes everything to happen. Rather it means that God can take everything that happens and make it fit His purpose.

Paul didn't want to be in prison and he didn't believe it was God's will for him to be there. He was trying to get out, believing that he was innocent. He was defending himself. He wanted to get out of there, but it didn't work out that way. So he can see now, now that he is in it, that God has turned something bad into something good. After all, who ever gets the chance to preach to the whole Praetorian guard - one by one. One gets converted and they send him in another one. Pauls says that none of this would have ever happened if I had not been put in chains. It's been for the good.

What a wonderful, buoyant and invincible spirit. That's faith. That's what faith in providence looks like. You look for the best in everything that happens. You may not know why this has happened, but you trust that God is at work in it and He is going to make something good come out of it.

That hymn that we tried to sing before the sermon was chosen because it has the same theme. Hear Whittier's beautiful words:

"I know not what the future hath of marvel or surprise,
Assured alone that life and death, God's mercy underlies."

I believe that and I preach that! And, I try to help others to see their lives that way because I believe that's what our Christian faith is all about. Faith is really trust, trust that God is in charge when you are not. And so you look for something good to happen, even in the worst of circumstances. Paul says, "I want you to know this - that what has happened to me has turned out to be all right. It's been a good thing!" I can buy that. I like it.

BUT THEN WE COME TO OUR TEXT

But then we come to our text for this morning, those famous and familiar words, "For me to live is Christ! And to die is gain!" And...I'm not 100% sure that I can go that far. He goes on,

"If it is to be life in the flesh, that means faithful labor for me, but my desire is to depart and be with Christ. But remaining in the flesh is more necessary for your account. But I really want to die and be with Christ, for that is far better."

I don't know about that. I have a bit of trouble with this and it frankly makes me feel uncomfortable. It's kind of eerie. Paul is supposed to be our example...but maybe he has gone too far, over the edge. Besides, it just seems to be out of place in this letter. Here he has just told the Philippians how much he loves them and how much he yearns to be with them. Imagine the Philippians reading that, tears welling up in their eyes. "Paul really loves us. He wishes he could be with us". And then reading, "Of course, it would be good for you if I came to see you, but if I had my choice between seeing you and dying, I'd rather die."

It makes you wonder: what's happened to Paul? Has prison pushed him off the "deep end?" Has he become one of those religious fanatics that sees everything in this life as being futile, vain and worthless? Is that the case?

It made me think of those old revival hymns of the last century that saw this world as a vale of tears. They could hardly wait to get out of this place. "Farewell, vain world, I'm coming home"...as if this world were an alien, hostile land in which we are trapped for a time. I don't feel that way. My soul doesn't long to leave here. I've read and sung some of those hymns and wondered how our great grandparents could have sung them. I don't believe that this world is evil. I'm more in tune with the words of Maltbie Babcock's familiar hymn:

"This is my Father's world, and to my listening ears,
All nature sings, and round me rings, the music of
the spheres".

That's the Biblical view of the world. The Bible says that God was serious when He created the world. And He meant it when He said, "It's good". This world is here for us to enjoy it. And I'm just getting to the place in my life where I'm really enjoying it. I'm having a good time. I don't want to leave. It's taken me all these years to learn enough about life to start getting it right. I don't want it to end now.

"This is my father's world, O let me n'er forget,
That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the
ruler yet!"

ANT THEN THIS, TOO...

What's more, I don't think that we have to die in order to be "with Christ". I believe that Christ has come to us, which is really what the Gospel is all about. John put it this way, "God so loved the world that He gave His Son". Sent Him into the world, let Him die for the world, not so that we would high-tail it out of here, but so that we would live here - meaningfully and joyfully and creatively.

Paul knew that. Paul preached that Gospel. So when he said, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain....it can't mean an other worldiness. And if he doesn't mean that, then what does he mean. Let me take it a bit further and put it this way.

Paul had plans. Paul had some great plans. He wanted to go to Spain. That was one of his goals....to be able to one day say that he had gone from the Eastern part of the Empire to the Western border of it, clear to Spain, preaching the Gospel of Christ. So he was not at the end of the road. He was detoured from the road. He still had plans for his life. If he got out of prison on Monday, on Tuesday he'd be heading to Spain. He still wanted to live, but as with a sickness, or a surgery, or something else that "sits you down" or "grounds you", you've got time to think - to wrestle, to review.

Maybe that's what prison did to Paul. Maybe it got him to thinking about his mortality. Preachers, like Paul...tend to think about and talk about these things. In fact, they're professionals in talking about human mortality. But not even preachers really stop to think about it until something happens to them to bring it home. We're all that way; we all know that each "must do his own living and his own dying". Everybody knows that, but something has to happen to you before you realize that someday I'm going to die.

PRISON WILL DO THAT

Prison will do that to you. Those guards out there, the ones that had been listening to Paul. Paul knew that one day, when the order came to them those same men to whom he had preached the "Good News" would bring the "Bad News" and take him out. It could happen any time - today, this afternoon, tonight, tomorrow. And that probably got Paul thinking. Certainly the thought of being hanged within the hour can do a great deal to get rid of the cobwebs in a person's thinking and help him arrange his priorities.

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Paul, a follower of Christ, believes in providence. He's always preached it and now he's practicing it, on his own. And providence means that God can make good come out of even bad things. So Paul says, "If I live I will have meaningful work to do, in the Providence of God. And if I die I will have a new adventure, in the Providence of God." So, "For me to live is Christ and to die will be gain".

"I know not what the future hath
of marvel or surprise,
Assured alone that life and death,
God's mercy underlies...."

SITUATIONS OF EXTREMITY

I think that situations of extremity can give you a whole new insight into your mortality. A person, let's say, has a serious illness. They sink to the point where the doctors tells the family that this is probably the end. But something happens - it isn't. The person recovers. And if these people are people of faith, you notice something different about them. There is a kind of freedom about them now. They are different. They know two things now. First, they know that life is a gift to them everyday. And they also know that someday they are going to die. They really know that now. They don't use Paul's word, but something like them. They say, "I want to live - but I'm not afraid to die. I came close enough to know it's going to be all right". "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

Martin Luther King, Jr. felt something of that, as you reflect on those magnificent words spoken a day or two back in 1968 before he was shot in Memphis. "I've been to the mountaintop and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you."

I mentioned Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of those who also wrote from behind prison walls. He was part of the underground resistance to Hitler during World War II. He was jailed with his brother and two of his brothers-in-law... members of the Abwehr, the German military intelligence elite, that attempted to Assassinate Hitler. He was kept alive for two years, moved from one prison to another, constantly interrogated as they tried to uncover the full dimension of the plot. Finally he was placed in Buchenwald, and was there during Holy Week, 1945. The war was near the end; the prisoners could hear the American guns.

But then Bonhoeffer and some other special prisoners were moved again, including a man named Payne Best, a British fighter pilot, who provided the information for these last days. He said they moved deeper into the Black Forest, traveling in a truck fueled by wood, since there was no gasoline available.

They came, the Sunday after Easter, to a little town name Schoenberg. The prisoners were put into a schoolhouse. Sitting on the floor on this Sunday after Easter, they asked Bonhoeffer, the Lutheran Pastor, if he would read a service. He hesitated because they weren't all Christian, but they persisted. And so he read the Lessons for the Sunday After Easter. Isaiah 53, "By His stripes we are healed..." And from the New Testament, the Epistle from I Peter, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who by His mercy has given us a lively hope in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead."

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CLOSING It's been said many ways by faithful Christians. Bonhoeffer said, "This is the end, but for me a beginning". King said, "I've have been to the mountain top and I have seen the Promised Land". That's what faith looks like when it comes up against the reality that someday I'm going to die. I believe that's what happened to Paul sitting there in prison in Rome and why he said in great faith, "For me to live is Christ - but to die will be gain."

PRAYER "When imprisoned by life's experiences, O God, and when we are forced by some extremity to reflect on our mortality, may we find the well springs of our faith speaking to us of your care and your providence, always remembering that "all things do work together for good to those who love You and serve You". May this be our faith, as it was Paul's faith, Bonhoeffer's faith, Martin Luther King's faith. In the name and spirit of Christ, we now pray. Amen"

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ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, January 17, 1988

I. VISITORS / GREETING

- A. We welcome the visitors in the congregation...delighted to have you with us...hopeful of the opportunity to greet you in a more personal way...
- B. Be free in the sharing of your name. Fill out...or sign a Guest Book. Join us on other Sundays. Share in fellowship with us. Work with us, too...
- C. A word about the Church. Our roots are deep in the soil of this city. Founded in 1837, now in our 151st year. Neighborhood church. Minister in the name of Christ, and it is in His loving spirit...

II. PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Review the parish concerns in the bulletin. Pick up a copy of our monthly news sheet.
- B. Note: Finance Committee meets this week to receive the final report of the Every Member Financial Canvass.
- C. Pick up your box of 1988 offering envelopes. Downstairs on a table.
- D. Note the word regarding the permanent name tag as well as the flyer describing the January 30th Rummage Sale for which workers are needed.
- E. Adult Bible Class at 9:15 on a Sunday morning. Dr. John Simms is leading it. Commend it to you. Learning about Methodism - history, founding fathers, what it's all about and where is it going.

III. THREE ROSES ON THE ALTAR

- A. Note the word regarding the roses on the altar. In honor of three new lives born recently to church families.

IV. OFFERING

- A. "More blessed to give than it is to receive"

PASTORAL PRAYER: January 17, 1988

ALMIGHTY GOD, our loving and caring Father, we turn to You this day with eager, expectant and grateful hearts...fully aware that Your thoughts are above our thoughts and Your ways are higher than our ways.

HELP US TO REMEMBER that You are truly the hope of our days, the strength of our weakness. And for this we praise Your holy name.

WE GATHER here this morning with happy recollection of our experience of You and of Your saving and redeeming power in times past.

IF THERE are fears and frustrations that haunt us at this year's beginning, let us hear Your counsel and let us feel Your comfort and supportive power.

MAY there be inroads of Your strength in our lives to make us conquerors in times of crisis.

MAY there be wells of spiritual reserve in our souls for the valleys through which we shall surely walk in weeks ahead.

MAY there be deposits of divine guidance firmly planted in our minds for those times of temptation and decision that will be ours in the months of this year.

HELP US FATHER, to face the future with definite courage and with deep commitment.

GRANT to each of us a sensitive heart - a heart of true concern that will respond to the hurts and ills of those about us.

WE ASK for wisdom in the hour of opportunity and for patience in the moment of failure.

HELP US always to remember that You are the craftsman of life, and that we are only Your tools. Make us instruments of Your spirit.

THAT THIS year may be one of victory through venture, one of accomplishment through action.

WE NOW ASK YOUR SPECIAL BLESSINGS upon those who are sad and lonely, upon those who are sick and suffering from illness. There are others present this hour who need guidance and love and support because of difficulties and problems they face.

WE ASK YOUR blessing upon the President and his cabinet, upon all leaders who have awesome responsibilities. Guide them, Father, in the path of peace. All this we ask in the name and spirit of Christ, our Lord.