

## Paul's Gospel and Ours

Ps 124 & Philippians 2:1-11 – Sermon Text = Philippians 2:1-2  
773, 763, 721, 712

***If then there is any encouragement in Christ,  
Any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit,  
any compassion and sympathy,  
make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love,  
being in full accord and of one mind.  
(Philippians 2:1-2)***

I spent most of this past week  
in what felt like a monastic retreat.

That is not my normal mode of being.  
I'm usually rushing around,  
connecting with lots of people,  
trying to catch up on all the things I've promised to do.  
I can be too frenetic and too scattered too often.

So, spending four days on my own in a large stone house  
a couple of hours north and east of Toronto  
with no cable or internet  
was not a normal way of being for me.  
I did go out once in the morning for coffee  
and once in the evening for dinner and the Jays game,  
but most of the time I was one my own,  
with jazz from my smart phone playing softly in the background.

I was continuing to sort through the books and papers  
of one of my dear mentors in ministry, John Duncan.  
John died this past spring, a few months after his wife, Bona, had died.  
John was a prison chaplain, a parish minister, and on our national office staff.  
We shared passions for good worship, good theology, good books,  
good conversation, and good beer.

John was one of those friends to whom Paul's brilliant line about being  
'treasures in earthen vessels' applied frustratingly well at times -  
well, most of the time, especially in his later years.  
He could be miserable, stubborn, demanding, opinionated, and selfish.

But he did have a brilliant mind,  
one deeply touched by the Gospel Paul expounds in our text this morning.

I was struck when I first read this text  
as I was planning this series of sermons  
on Paul's wisdom for being the church  
at what a marvellous summary of Paul's Gospel  
these two verses were.

Let me draw that out a bit.

First, the reality to which these words point  
is the reality of being 'in Christ.'  
By God's mercy and grace,  
the moment we are convicted of being 'out of Christ'  
is the precise moment that we are saved 'into Christ.'  
God has no illusions about how separated we become  
from our home in the family of the Holy Trinity.  
But his judgement on us for that  
is unlike any judgement we have ever experienced.  
It is a judging/saving Word that brings us back into the family,  
back into the relationships that nourish us to flourish as blessings in the world.

And listen again to the words Paul uses to describe  
this new form of being –  
encouragement, consolation, love, compassion, sympathy, joy, and full accord.

Ponder for a moment what your life would be like  
if those qualities of being filled you and surrounded you  
every minute of every day.

Now, Paul's Gospel is this –  
that they do!  
Every minute of every day, you are in Christ.  
To participate fully in this new reality, you have to accept it and engage in it.  
But it is there for the choosing.  
And with those choices, for faith is a matter of continually choosing life over death,  
you will live in, be filled with, and share broadly  
encouragement, consolation, love, compassion, sympathy, joy, and full accord.

That's Paul's Gospel, and he is constantly inviting us to make it ours.

Think of the power of being taken into this Gospel,  
this work of God that is designed to reconcile this beloved world to the Holy Trinity  
and put it back on the path to justice, peace, and beauty.

Isn't that something so attractive, so alluring, so fascinating,  
that you can't really resist it?

The other focus in this passage for Paul  
is the importance of our minds being formed by this Gospel.  
For Paul, drawing on his Jewish background,  
'mind' means the seat of wisdom, the source of meaning,  
the integrated consciousness of intellect, emotion, and instinct  
aligned and active in guiding us  
into the ways of compassionate and comprehensive community.

This kind of integration, within us and among us,  
is what the Spirit is doing for us every minute of every day.  
And the disciplines of the Christian life –  
worship, learning, fellowship, and service –  
are intended by God to encourage and enable us  
to grow in our consciousness of our relationship with this community of God,  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

My four days at Woodstone House was a working retreat.  
John named me his literary executor,  
responsible for the disposal of all his books and papers.  
He had a lot of books and kept a lot of papers.  
In all honesty, he was a hoarder of books and papers.  
This time I packed up about 85 boxes of books,  
each box containing on average 35 books - almost 3000 books.  
There are still 1500 books to be boxed on some future visit.

I ran across an article that John had written about his relationship with his books.  
he was unpacking them and putting them on shelves  
in the office of his last parish before he retired,  
at St. Giles in Sarnia, ON.

With only a brief nod to the addictive and obsessive qualities of this relationship,  
and he was seriously addicted to buying books,  
he pondered how they shaped his mind through the conversations he had with them.

For John, reading a book was always a conversation about the Gospel –  
its content, its context, its challenge, its compelling compassion.  
Most of the books are heavily underlined with comments scribbled in the margins.

I might have gotten more packed  
were it not for my own fascination with finding out  
where those conversations were going with some of the books  
John and I had discussed and debated over the years of our friendship.

But my overwhelming impression, in the midst of all this work and wonder,  
was that I was remembering and appreciating afresh  
a mind that was shaped by Paul's Gospel,  
by the encouragement, consolation, love, compassion, sympathy, joy, and full accord  
that filled Paul so powerfully and can fill us, if we choose to let it.