

Paul's affection for the Christian community at Philippi which he had founded is clear in today's passage from his letter to them. The relationship was not entirely without difficulties. Paul had some straight words to say to some individuals who were at odds; and then there is a faction, possible outsiders, with whom he takes issue. These may be a group similar to those who made serious trouble for him in Galatia (which goes to show that parish life has not changed much in two thousand years). However, Paul's abiding love for this Church is clear; and they encouraged him with practical as well as emotional support.

Paul tells them not to worry. At one level this is absurd advice, impossible to fulfil then as it would be now. We live in a world irrupting with warfare, conflict, threat of rampant, deadly disease, while the environment itself is in rapid decay, caused by human, thoughtless greed.

In the first century the *Pax Romana*, Rome's Peace, instituted by Emperor Augustus, broadly held, but Philippi, situated on the major transport corridor of the Via Egnatia, would have been familiar with the passage of troops, not always well disciplined. Not far from the coast, there was an ever-present threat from pirates. Pompey, the Roman General, had cleared up the Mediterranean but thieves on the high seas who raid the coastal towns and hinterland would be a problem until modern times. In addition the vagaries of the weather and agricultural blight made living a worrisome experience; and any disease or sickness would go untreated. Catastrophe was a shadow-companion.

What Paul counselled was not to have no worries, they were unavoidable, but not to have ultimate worries. Christ has redeemed his people by his death on the cross and so ultimately "all will be well".

He prays for them that the peace of God will be in their hearts and minds and that the God of peace will be with them. It is a neat apposition: the peace of God and the God of peace. Peace was an important concept for Paul. What did it mean for him?

Paul wrote in Greek and so the word for peace is "*eirene*" whose basic meaning is the opposite of, or absence of, war. Behind the Greek for Paul as an educated Pharisee is the Hebrew word "*Shalom*".

"*Shalom alekem*" is the everyday greeting between Jews. "Peace be with you" or as we would say, "Good morning. How do you do?" Or even, "Have a nice day!" But there is a richer background of meaning to "Shalom" than there is in our mundane greetings.

"*Shalom*" is concerned with wholeness; a well-being which involves completeness.

To be at peace is to be one with God, and that requires being at one with self, others and the world. Thus the opposite of peace is brokenness, division, alienation from self, others, world and God; a divided, a broken heart. The opposite of peace is seen in the consequences of sin.

When God made the world in the biblical poem-drama, he completed his work on the seventh day. Creation as completed by God is whole, well, perfect, at peace. As the story unfolds division slithers into human experience and everything falls apart. Man is divided from woman; the couple are alienated from their environment; humanity is ejected from the company of God. As the sorry saga continues, brother kills brother; mankind is shattered into many pieces by the confusion of languages. Sin in myriad forms always has the consequence of division, alienation, break up and break down.

Christ reconciled all things to himself by his sacrifice on the cross, bringing his peace to the world, his "*shalom*". By his wounds we are healed, our divided hearts are bandaged; a broken world is renewed.

To make this "*shalom*" their own, Paul encourages the worried of Philippi to pray. What does prayer achieve? If God knows what we need and God is loving then surely God will provide? If God is perfect and therefore unchanging, why bother with prayer?

Prayer does not change God. Prayer changes us. Prayer sustains our relationship with God and thereby we are transformed, slowly but effectively if we are faithful to that prayer. If we spend time in the presence of good people, something of their goodness touches and changes us. If we spend time in God's presence how much more will we change; as we broaden our vision by God's grace in us and slowly bring our desires into accord with God's will. Eventually there is only one prayer: "Not my will but your will"; or as we say in even more familiar words: "Thy will be done on earth as in heaven".

To share the mind of God is to be whole, undivided, complete, reconciled, at peace. To be without ultimate worries.