

## ***The Lord is Near* – Sermon by Rev Phil Wootton for Sunday 12 December 2021**

### **Philippians 4: 4-7 & Luke 3: 7-18**

What is so important you have to keep checking your phone? Are you expecting news of the birth of a grandchild, perhaps? That would be so important! Or perhaps you're waiting on football scores? I can't criticise! Or perhaps it's the dread news of latest infection, hospitalisation and mortality figures? Somehow, they've become a dark obsession.

When St Paul says, 'The Lord is near!' we probably don't think to track his progress on Google maps. When St John the Baptist says, 'One coming after me is greater than I ... and he will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire,' we probably don't check our phones for an update. But the hour is late. The third candle on the Advent crown has been lit. We're only days from celebrating his birth: are you excited? We're nearer now than ever before to the day he returns in glory: have you invested in being prepared? Any day, he can come and meet us individually, in our work or in our worship, in word or sacrament, in creation or in face of friend or stranger. Have we tuned in to notice? 'The Lord is near!' What is our level of expectation? Are we on the edge of our seats?

How do we wait expectantly? Our two readings actually give very different answers. John the Baptist communicates ferocious urgency in his message: change your life now! Whereas the sometimes-irascible St Paul here calls us to gentleness because the Lord is near. We need both of those answers. Let's think about Paul's first.

Paul wrote his Letter to the Philippians while he was in gaol, almost certainly in Ephesus. So, he's on the Turkish side of the Adriatic, whilst Philippi is on the Greek side. Paul is what we'd call a prisoner of conscience – he's there because of his faith – but remarkably in this letter he seems to be at his happiest. The letter's full of rejoicing.

The little passage that we heard begins with the words, 'Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: rejoice!' For a man in prison to be saying that, it might seem absurd – but, 'the Lord is near.' Paul's feelings are those of someone about to be released. But even if that doesn't happen, his attitude will be unchanged. He doesn't need to bemoan his misfortune; he doesn't need to fight and struggle against unjust confinement. Faith that the Lord is near gives him the peace of mind to treat everyone with gentleness. Anxieties fall away: bring every situation to God in prayer, he says, being thankful in every situation (however rough it seems). The thumping heart and anxious mind will be calmed: God's peace watches over your heart and mind like a security guard minding a treasure trove – utterly vigilant.

Rejoice. Have a party. The word for 'rejoice' here isn't just about being cheerful (although it includes that). It's the word used for a public festivity. It might be a victory celebration, or chariot races or even the Olympic games! So, for us, have a party – even a street party – that's the way to prepare, because the Lord is on his way.

Peace of mind is a wonderful thing, but it can be a cover for complacency. Anyone who is in danger of complacency should be sent to John the Baptist. He'll soon knock them out of it. When John saw in the crowds coming to him, he must have felt they were just looking for the latest sensation, a new attraction to entertain them, not a serious engagement with the kingdom of God. So he went at them full-bore: 'You brood of vipers! How dare you try to piggy-back onto my movement! You may not use baptism as green-wash, and your pious cliches will do you no good! Either you're serious, or you're out of here! Turn you lives around!'

What had he got in mind? Certainly not just a religious experience, but nor are the actions he demands enough of themselves. Actions must be the fruit that comes out of repentance. The change of heart is what matters. That is the only way to be ready for when the Lord comes. John gets down to specifics: if you've got two coats, give one of them away to someone who doesn't have one at all. If you've got food in your larder, share it with someone who hasn't any. This cuts to the quick in our society of excess and fast fashion, whilst at the same time ever more people rely on food-banks. And we think we've done our bit by throwing a few pounds in the charity collection box. I'm sure John would have something to say about us too!

John moves on to specific groups: tax-collectors, only collect what's due; soldiers, don't bully money out of civilians. To us, that sounds less challenging; in fact, we're outraged at stories of embezzlement and extortion. But equally, peer pressure in modern workplaces can operate the same way: 'you're not paid very much, so you're entitled to a bit extra;' 'it's what we all do, part of what we signed up for;' 'to refuse it makes us all look bad.' But John says, the Lord will soon be here. Will you really stand before him and try to justify yourself?

So, the Lord is near. Do keep checking your phone: the baby's due any day. And get the party ready. The Lord is near: keep an eye on the news. There's a new King coming to his throne. Get ready to live under new regulations. The Lord is near: take a minute in prayer, to ask him, ask yourself, what you need to change in your life to be ready for him. Yes, take that minute right now, I'm going to stop talking so we all have a minute of silence before the Lord.

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The Lord is near. Therefore, 'In everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.' Amen.