

Good morning everyone. It is wonderful to be here together today. It is good to remind ourselves that great things are happening, that spring is here. Just like when we look into the orchards we can see a haze of blossom, there is blossom also in our community and in our church. Spring is here.

Let us pray

The passage today is Philippians 4 verses 4 to 9.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let everyone know how gracious and gentle you are. The Lord is near.

Do not worry about anything, Rather, in every area of your life let God know what you want, as you pray and make requests, and give thanks as well. And God's peace, which is greater than we can ever understand, will keep guard over your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. ¹

Here what the Spirit is saying to the church.

I remember clearly the first time I saw a Shakespearean play. It was Hamlet, and it was being performed at Auckland University, I went with my class from school. I kept hearing lines that I had heard somewhere before, like "*there is something rotten in the state of Denmark.*" There was quote after quote after quote, and it took me a little while to realise - this is where those lines originally came from. Shakespeare didn't take a series of sayings and string them together, he was the one who wrote them.

This morning's passage contains a number of sayings that might be familiar.

¹ *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Php 4:4–9). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.

There are at least four different ones that I have seen on wall plaque's, bookmarks or posters. I have a couple of them myself that I have collected over the years. They are wonderful sayings that seem to stand on their own.

Now certainly, by the time we come to this part of the book, Paul was starting to get to the end of the scroll that he was writing on. There was only so much space available. You only had a certain size of scroll to write on.

It probably dates me, but I can remember writing on an aerogram, as a family we wrote one every so often back to my Fathers family in the Netherlands. There was only a certain amount of space, and so when we got near to the end, we started writing in short bullet points rather than in long flowing phrases.

So there is a hint of that going on here.

But this passage is more than just a series of disconnected verses on separate subjects.

There is a single theme on Paul's mind.

A theme about two paths.

A path of rejoicing, gentleness, graciousness and peace.

Or instead of that a path of being worried, tense and always concerned about things.

Two different paths that we can walk on.

I am sure you can think of people who are firmly on one path or the other.

Sometimes we change, sometimes we alternate, but some people seem to be gentle, gracious and at peace most of the time. And others seem to be always worried and concerned about things.

Well, you might wonder why I said that the passage was about that. Well that is the progression through the passage and the theme that develops.

The passage starts off with Paul talking about rejoicing. Real rejoicing, being alright inside yourself, being content. When we are like that, instead of being people who are into power and control, being people who are known for strict justice. Instead of that, it is our graciousness, our gentleness, our reasonableness that shows through. That is how the word gentleness was understood in Paul's context, it was used as a contrast to power and control.

And this is the path of rejoicing. It is a path of gentleness, graciousness and peace. But so often we are kept from that path because we worry. When we worry we want to control things, we want the power to make things happen like we want them to happen. So the passage goes on to say Do not worry about anything.

Now do not worry about anything. Does not mean that everything is totally smooth. As followers of Jesus, as people who are concerned for others, we will have things happen to us that are concerning and we will be concerned about others as well.

But instead of worrying, it does mean that when things happen that might cause us concern, there is a different path for us to follow. We can have concerns that we come across, but we can still be people of gentleness, graciousness and peace.

Now a few years ago there was a song that was on the radio, "don't worry, be happy". Do you remember it? Now some of the lyrics had good advice "when in life you have some trouble, if you have worry you make it double" does sound similar to Jesus saying "can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life".

But I think that the song didn't go far enough. It had a bouncy tune, but that was about it.

Just being told "do not worry" does not change anything. It is hard not to worry when there are things that concern us.

So what does the bible say to do instead? Where does the passage lead?

Well the bible does not usually give advice like "10 steps to happiness", you know the sort of advice that you might find in a magazine.

But in this case, the passage is quite clear and there is some real advice there for us.

When we have a concern that comes our way. The passage says, do not let it become a worry.

Instead of doing that:

In every area of your life, let God know what you want. As you pray and make requests give thanks as well.

So we have a concern, instead of letting it become a worry, we let God know about it. We pray, we make our requests and we give thanks.

Now remember, this is about concerns we might have in all areas of our lives.

The whole lot. The things that we might normally talk about, the things that we might normally keep quiet and hidden away.

The things that are definitely ours, and the things where we are concerned about others. It is about the whole lot, in every area of our lives. Anything that we are concerned about, that could become a worry. That is included.

We are to let God know about them. Pray, talk to God about them. And then don't hold onto them.

Now sometimes people let God know about their concerns, and then they still worry about them as well. Paul did not want people to do that.

The passage says instead of worrying give God our concerns, it does not say for us to try and do both.

As I was thinking about this, I realised one of the key questions was Who is holding the worry, is it us, or is it God. If we still have it, then we haven't let go of it. If it is God who is holding the worry, then we can relax since it is in God's hands.

We can let God know what we are asking for.

Now that doesn't mean to say that what we ask for will happen in exactly the way that we want it to happen. God is God, we are not. It may happen, or it may not.

Sometimes we only see what God has done when we look back over the years.

We need to trust that God will be faithful, that God will do as he has promised.

But doing this does mean that we do not need to carry the worry. We have given the worry to God.

We can give thanks to God, because the worry, the concerns are in God's hands not ours.

And then, when we do that. God's peace will be like a gatekeeper around our heart and mind and keep us safe from that worry.

The image here is of a Roman fortress. Where there were sentries keeping watch. Through the day and through the night. No one, could sneak up and overwhelm with a surprise attack because there were guards there. The people inside the fortress could relax and let their guard down since they were in a safe place. We do not need to be hyper vigilant, always on edge, we can relax, God's peace is guarding us.

God's peace, that peace that is greater than what we can understand or comprehend, will guard our hearts and minds, it will guard our emotions and our thoughts.

Now that does mean that when things try and sneak up on us, and the worry wants to come and take our peace away, then we will realise and get a warning. That is the time when their might be something that we might need to do. Not every place is a safe place. Sometimes we need to take action, it is not saying sit back, relax, and take a holiday from life. But it is saying, do not worry about what needs to be done.

We can give that worry back to God.

We might need to do this time after time. Particularly if we are people who have had a life time of worrying about things. But we can change.

And then, as well as handling things as they happen, we can also work to prevent some of these worries arriving in the first place.

living a life that leads to that path of gentleness, graciousness and peace.

Instead of living a life that leads to a path of being worried, tense and always concerned about things.

And that preventative side, is really influence by what we dwell on,

The things that we focus on, the things that we think about before we go to sleep. And the passage talks about us thinking about, focussing on, meditating on, dwelling upon the good things rather than the bad.

Now I understand this can be tricky.

For most of my working life, a lot of what I did was to try and fix things that were not working. Trying to make things better and more efficient.

Performance reviews always focussed on things where I could improve. That is what working life can be like. There are times when we need to critique things. There are times when we are in a bad situation and we need to make a real change. This is not a call for us to suspend judgment and just think everything in the world is lovely and wonderful. That it is all fluffy white clouds and happy bunnies.

But this is about the things that we focus on, meditate on, that we dwell on.

Let me give you a contrast.

Sometimes we talk about people who let things fester. That is a fairly common saying. And it describes people who take something that has annoyed them, and they keep on playing it over and over in their minds. And when they do that, they become the opposite of people who are known for their gentleness, graciousness and peace. They are the sort of people who are described as being mean spirited, tense and having a chip on their shoulder. Those are all sayings you might have heard. That is what happens when people meditate and think on the bad stuff.

We can focus on the best of what people have done or what we have done and the upside of situations we are in, or we can think the worst of what people have done or what we have done and the situations we are in.

Now usually people are not out to get us. They might make bad choices that make our life difficult. They might not be wonderful at their job, which might make what we do harder, but usually people are not out to get us.

And we usually will be trying our best as well. We might make bad choices, we might make mistakes that make our life harder, but in general we will be trying to do the right things.

And when we look at others, ourselves and situations we will find the true, we will find the honourable, we will find the pure the pleasing, the commendable, the excellent. We will see the hand of God at work.

If those are the things that we dwell on, rather than the person who cut in front of us at the roundabout while we were driving to church. Then good will come of it. We will become a person of peace, someone who is unflustered by the storms, someone who is at ease in times of trouble. We can become a person who rejoices, who is known for their gentleness, their graciousness and their peace.

We can become people like that.

That is my prayer for myself and for all of us here.

Amen.