

Dear congregation!

The name of this Sunday Laetare – which means rejoice! is a provocation. It seems to suggest that the time of Lent is not only a time of sadness and grieving and that within the experience of sadness and grieving can also lie deeper possibilities for joy and rejoicing, which we do not expect. And that is what our sermon text for today is all about: Philippians 1:(12-14) 15-21.

¹² I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; ¹⁴ and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the LORD by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear. ¹⁵ Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. ¹⁶ These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; ¹⁷ the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. ¹⁸ What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰ It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.

To begin with, a few observations on the situation Paul finds himself in: He is at the end of his tether, personally and with proclaiming the Gospel message; he's at a dead-end street, humanly speaking, by not being able to proclaim because he's been captured and thrown into prison in Rome. His friends from Philippi are very concerned about him and had

a message sent to him asking: how are you doing?

His answer: Actually, despite everything, I'm doing good, – because the Gospel is doing good, even though I can't be out there proclaiming. It has become known throughout the imperial guard that his imprisonment was for Christ. The imperial guard would have consisted of elite Roman soldiers who protected the emperor and his family and kept political unrest under control. The Philippians might have assumed that being in prison would prevent Paul from spreading the good news of Jesus Christ, but Paul says, it has actually helped him to reach these soldiers and others. Paul's sufferings made him known at court, where perhaps he would never have otherwise been known and this might lead some of them to enquire after the gospel for which he suffered, which they might otherwise have never heard of.

How could Paul talk like that when the members of congregations he had planted were starting to rebel against the very message he had proclaimed? How could Paul talk like that when he was spending time in city jails and Roman prisons or facing physical beatings or even when he had to deal with that physical ailment we know only as "a thorn in my flesh" that he speaks of in 2 Corinthians (12:7)? Even when he's facing execution in Rome, he's still hopeful of eternal life. Was Paul just putting the best construction on a life full of bad situations?

Paul's court case wasn't complete. He could still get a judgment of condemnation from the Roman emperor. Then on top of all that, Paul was informed of troubles brewing in some of the congregations he had started. In fact, some of his enemies were trying to take Paul's job out of envy and selfish ambition. What would all of this do to the ministry of the Gospel? What would all of this do to Paul? Frankly, his situation would make most of us take a very realistic, even pessimistic view of life in general. We'd probably be pretty pessimistic about the prospects of the Gospel going out into the world, let alone surviving in existing congregations.

Yet listen to what Paul has to say. “Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.”

Is Paul just being unrealistically optimistic? Take a closer look. Paul isn't looking at the empty glass and hoping it will fill up someday. Paul has reason to rejoice—Christ is proclaimed! Paul rejoices because Christ is proclaimed in difficult situations. Paul explains why imprisonment advanced the good news of Jesus. “As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.” Paul rejoiced because he knew God provided the opportunities—even in the most difficult situations—for Christ to be proclaimed through Paul and many others. Why was Paul even in prison? It's not like he had committed a capital crime, but Paul was in chains because of Christ. His enemies wanted him dead or at least tossed in jail with the key thrown away. They wanted him silenced, but yet it became quite clear among the imperial palace guards and all the people serving there in the palace that Paul was “in chains for Christ.” ...But what about the work of the Gospel? Who would take that good news of Jesus out into the world to other regions and cities and homes? Paul was under house arrest and he spoke with everyone who visited him, including those Roman guards assigned to watching him, but he couldn't get out there into the world to preach and teach Christ. If not Paul, then who? “Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.” Even though Paul wanted the freedom to preach the good news of Jesus, his prison time for the sake of Christ moved others to speak about Christ “more courageously and fearlessly.” More voices were opening up about Christ and his Word. More conversations were being had with people about Christ. Paul had every right to rejoice because Christ was proclaimed even in these difficult situations.

Yes, Paul even rejoices because Christ is proclaimed through imperfect messengers. Paul explains what God was accomplishing. “It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. The former Christ preach out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.” Paul rejoiced because he knew God would accomplish his work even in spite of those who proclaimed Christ for impure or imperfect reasons. Now it might sound rather strange that anyone would want to proclaim the Gospel out of selfish ambition or envy, but Paul was a very influential leader in the early Christian church. He was the tip of the spear as the Gospel went to the major cities of the Roman Empire. Strange as it sounds, people were jealous of his influence and leadership. So, when Paul ended up in a Roman prison, they saw their opportunity. They tried to replace Paul and take his job of Gospel proclaimer. They figured they would cause him trouble and people would think more highly of them. Yet what they didn't realize is that God was using them to proclaim Christ and accomplish his work despite their motives. Paul knew that the message that was going out in spite of his difficult situation, in spite of the imperfect motives of the messengers, was the true, life-changing message of Jesus. Paul makes that clear, when he says: “But what does it matter? The important thing is that in **every way**, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.” You could try to dismiss Paul's joy as putting the best construction on a tough situation, but Paul isn't looking at it through rose-coloured glasses. No, he saw the big picture. Paul rejoiced because he knew God was at work, even in adversity and struggle. He knew that the Gospel message being proclaimed was God's good news for all people. Paul knew that God would work through that Word to rescue souls and guide them on the path to heaven.

That is what causes Paul to rejoice! He repeats the main theme of the letter: rejoicing in the gospel no matter what the circumstances. This is not a blind or naïve rejoicing. Nor is it a pain-denying rejoicing. It is a deep confidence, a deep trust, that God will bring His purposes to fruition in the end. Maybe we have experienced it ourselves, when someone from their sickbed encouraged us with hope and courage and faith despite them being held captive by the prison of their illness. What is the source of this deep trust and confidence in them and in Paul? In his letter to the Romans Paul makes the source very clear: Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, for thy sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

But I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. [Romans 8.37-39]

Nothing separates us from Christ. Nothing separates us from his saving love. Nothing separates us from His perfect message. See, the message of the Gospel does not need perfect messengers. You don't have to be trained to talk about your Saviour, to share what you have personally learned from God's Word and why that matters for your life. God accomplishes his work, and his Word never returns to him empty working even through imperfect messengers. It's the message that is perfect, not the messengers. We proclaim the perfect message—the message from God himself, of His saving love and grace in Jesus Christ. I think sometimes we forget that we need that perfect message to be proclaimed to us time and again—the good news that you have a Saviour who purifies your lips, who cleanses your wrongs, who forgives your failures, and who gives you reason to rejoice even when you trip over your words. That's not trying to put the best construction on a bad situation. That's not trying to see an empty

glass as half full. No, you and I can rejoice because Christ was proclaimed to us through fumbling, stumbling lips and now Christ is proclaimed through our own.

Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Nothing in this life. And certainly nothing in death. No prison in Rome could keep Christ from Paul, and no prison-like illness, loneliness, struggle, or heartache will keep Christ from us here. Whatever hardship we may face; whatever challenge comes our way as individuals or as plagues us all our days, we can rejoice in the knowledge that the suffering Christ is glorified in our bodies, whether in life or in death. For, as Paul also says: [Romans 14.8-9]

... whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ both died, and rose, and revived, that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

As we face death every day, this day Paul reminds us of the one death that changed everything—Christ' death on the cross. When Christ died on the cross, he defeated death. When Christ was buried in the tomb, he transformed every grave from a keeper of the dead into a doorway to everlasting life. And as Christ rose from the dead, revived once again, he put death under his feet. Yes, we will die, but death has no more dominion over the risen Christ, and therefore it has no more dominion over us. As Christ rose from his grave, we shall rise from our graves. This is a great hope that never dies! This is the source of true joy, no matter what the circumstances.

This is the message that gives us real hope and true joy as we take his good news to the people in our lives. Rejoice that Christ is proclaimed through us, yes, even us! Amen