



## ST CHRISTOPHER'S 'SUSPENDED CHURCH' NEWSLETTER

Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> January 2021

### NEWS UPDATE



#### Suspension of Church Services

Things have moved at a pace since this time last week in terms of the pandemic and its impact on our nation. We need to recognise that coronavirus cases have been surging beyond that of the first peak in April, and as such we must accept another lockdown in order that the NHS is not totally overwhelmed. The situation in the South East is rather worrying, with ambulances waiting outside of hospitals to deliver patients because they are close to full to capacity.

We are up against a more contagious strain of the coronavirus, and the situation in the South East could easily be replicated here in the North West. For this reason we have made the decision, along with many other churches, to suspend all our services until further notice. Our primary concern is to keep people safe. We also felt that by suspending church services we are showing solidarity with the rest of society, who are feeling the loss of schools, gyms, salons, etc. I personally felt a bit uncomfortable with the idea of churches being shown preferential treatment, and would rather we showed sacrifice like everybody else.

I suspect that the government will make church closures compulsory in the next week or two anyway. In the meantime, we will find other ways to encourage and support each other as we did in the spring, including the continuation of these newsletters, regular phone calls, and the Tuesday evening prayer group on zoom.



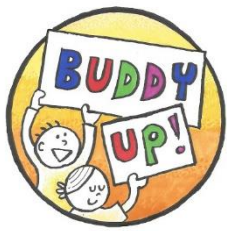
## We are suspending all church services until further notice.

### We are still here for you. You can:

- Receive the weekly newsletter, by email or by post.
- Join our Tuesday evening prayer group on Zoom.
- Be part of a church phone group and receive a regular call.
- Request that the church building is opened up for you to spend time in quietness and personal prayer.
- Get in touch if you need any help or support, and arrange to see the vicar in certain circumstances.

To take forward any of these things email [admin@stchristopherslea.org](mailto:admin@stchristopherslea.org), or send a message through our Facebook page.

## Church 'Buddy System'



An idea that has been put forward is to create a type of 'buddy system' by linking our children and young people together with some of the more elderly members of the church. Exchanging letters by linking young and old together could be a source of joy to both parties, and I think it would work.

If you would like to take part in this, whether for yourself or for your children, get in touch with myself or Hilary and we will organise things over the next couple of weeks.

## Philippians Bible Series

Last week I felt that the Tuesday evening prayer group would do well to work through St Paul's letter to the Philippians together. Our time reflecting on the opening section of the letter was so rich, that I thought we could roll out a series on Philippians for everyone. The series is entitled 'joy in adversity,' and will take us up to the end of Lent. I sense that the themes within the letter are timely for us.

### JOY IN ADVERSITY

**Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> January – Rejoicing in God and others – Philippians 1:1-11**

**Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> January – Seeing God at work in all circumstances – Philippians 1:12-18**

**Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> January – Courage in Life and death – Philippians 1: 19-26**

**Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> January – Standing firm together – Philippians 1: 27-30**

**Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> February – Imitating Christ's Humility – Philippians 2:1-11**

**Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> February – Shining like Stars – Philippians 2:12-18**

**Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> February – Appreciating Special people – Philippians 2:19-30**

**Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> February – The joy of knowing Jesus – Philippians 3:1-11**

**Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> March – Looking forwards, pressing onwards – Philippians 3:12-21**

**Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> March – Peace through prayer and thanksgiving – Philippians 4:1-9**

**Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> March – Joy and Contentment – Philippians 4:10-23**

## **BIBLE READING – Philippians 1:1-11**

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,*

*To all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

*It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart and, whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God's grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.*

*And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.*

### **THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE**

#### **Joy from inside a prison cell**



Philippi was a major city in ancient Greece located near the island of Thasos. Today its ruins remain, revealing a Greek theatre, basilicas, baths, city walls, and various other Greek and Roman features. In St Paul's time it was one of the bustling Greek cities that he visited on his missionary journeys, where he established a church community through his preaching and teaching. Paul did the same in various

towns and cities around the Mediterranean, each time moving on to plant a new church once they were sufficiently well-established.

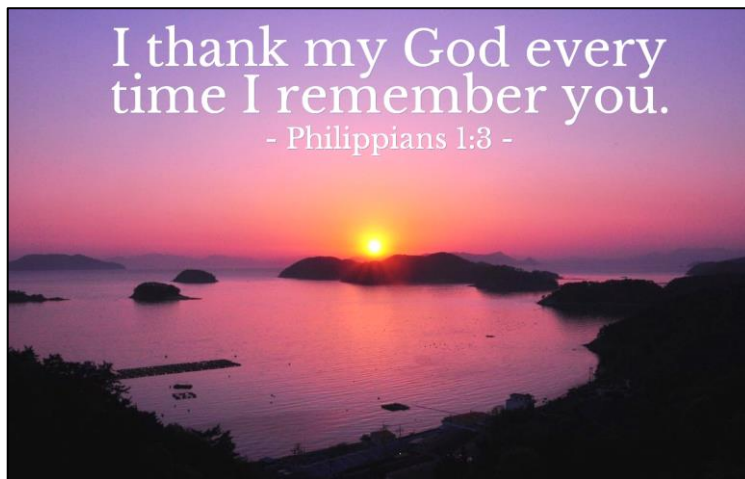
After moving on Paul wrote letters to these early churches to strengthen and encourage them. Some of the letters survived and were preserved by scribes over the centuries that followed, which is how they came to be included within the New Testament and we still read them today. Paul's letters provide a rich insight into his Christian faith and the life of the early churches. He sometimes wrote to address specific problems that had been reported to him, though in the case of this letter, it is mostly just pure encouragement.

Philippians is regarded as the most joyful of all Paul's letters, which is strange when you consider that he wrote it whilst chained up in prison! How was it that Paul was able to feel so upbeat despite his difficult circumstances? Well, if you want to know the answer to this question, then continue following this series. If there was ever a time to learn the secret of joy in adversity, it is surely now. Some days during lockdown we may feel like we too are imprisoned, be that in our own home, rather than a dungeon. If Paul was still able to find joy in his situation, then it must be possible for us too.



## Rejoicing in Special Relationships

Something that comes across very beautifully in Paul's letters is how much the first Christians loved one another. Paul felt such affection for them, and vice versa. Every time he remembered the Philippians, he was thankful. This was due in part to all that they had shared together, having worked as 'partners in the Gospel,' proclaiming the love of Jesus to the world. You may know from your own experience that often the deepest friendships are formed when we *do* things together. When we share a common purpose, and pursue a common goal, it forms a deep bond between people.

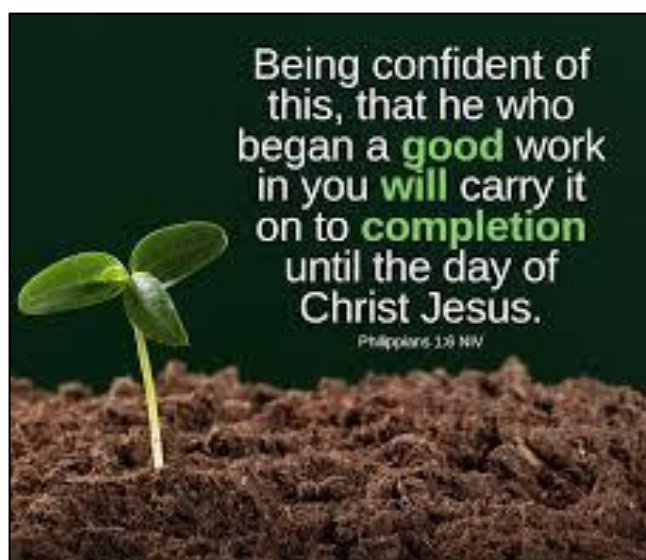


Evidently relationships within the church should be like this. When I think about my own experience of church over the years, it can be a case of stand up, sit down, sing a hymn, say a prayer, then nod at the vicar on the way out! It is surely meant to be something more than this – and in truth, it is. Relationships with other Christians are a source of great joy to me, especially when there is a sense of being together on a shared journey. Throughout this pandemic we have emphasized relationships within the church, because these have the potential to be a source of joy, just as they were for Paul.

## Rejoicing in the Grace of God

Paul was quite simply overwhelmed by the grace of God; that he, a sinner and former persecutor of the church, should come to know such love. He speaks of 'grace and peace' to them, and he rejoices that they 'share in God's grace with him.'

Ultimately Paul had a deep and unshakable faith, that no matter what happened nothing could separate him from the love of God made known through Jesus Christ. And not only this, he was also confident that however muddled or imperfect they might continue to be this side of heaven, God who had begun a



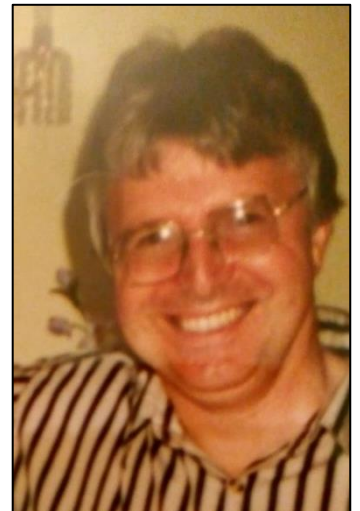
good work in them would 'carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.' This is encouraging news indeed, that when God begins His good work in our life, He will finish it. We need to remember this every time we fall short, every time we feel weak, and on any occasion when we feel like we are not really moving towards our heavenly destination. If we have begun a journey with Jesus Christ, with God having planted that seed of faith in our heart, then the outcome is sure because God will see through what He has started.

## Contagious Joy

As you read Paul's words to the Philippians, there is something contagious about Paul's joy. We can all relate to the idea of something being 'contagious' at the moment, with this new virus strain being more contagious than the one before. Unlike the coronavirus, there are some things in life that we would wish to catch! Wouldn't it be great if our faith, our love, and our joy, was more infectious than Covid-19.

What better inoculation against the gloom of this lockdown, in the middle of winter when the nights are long, than to find joy in the midst of adversity. I know this can be hard, but somehow Paul was able to find joy in the grace of God, and joy as he remembered special people whom he loved, from inside of a prison cell. If we too can find such a joy as this, let us not keep a 'spiritual distance' from others, but seek to infect them.

This has made me think about people I've known whose joy has been infectious. I remember a man called Robert Cuffe-Adams who was part of the church where I grew up. I asked my mum to get in touch with Robert's wife Val, and she has sent me this picture of him. My memory of Robert is that he was a peaceful man who was always smiling. He was a person of strong faith whose joy seemed to radiate from his eyes, which is all the more remarkable when I consider that he had a degenerative back condition that caused him great suffering. After multiple operations to remove the growth on his spine he lost movement in his legs and became wheelchair ridden, but this didn't seem to make him any less of a joyful Christian.



I have a particular memory of Robert that stays with me. We lived in a commuter village on the mainline to Paddington, and Robert took the train each morning to work. One day in my teens I was also travelling on the train to London, and I met Robert on his way to work, sat in his wheelchair in one of the gaps between the carriages. He was sat reading his bible notes with a big smile on his face (just like the smile in this picture), and every person who walked past him he knew, greeting each one with warmth and affection. It was truly a sight to behold, which is why I have never forgotten it. He just radiated joy and peace to all the other commuters.

Every operation that Robert received left his body weaker, and Robert died as a result of his back condition in his late 40s. This of course makes me very sad, and yet I know that deep down Robert would have felt the same as St Paul who said to the Philippians, *"to live is Christ and to die is gain."* (Philippians 1:21) Robert possessed the same kind of courage and hope.

His joy in adversity was not only remarkable, it was also contagious, and I know that Robert will have infected many people with that joy; including me. If you know someone who possesses a natural contagious joy, maybe consider calling them a bit more during this lockdown if you're ever feeling low. And if you are someone who just feels the joy of the Lord inside – like St Paul, and like Robert Cuffe-Adams – don't keep it to yourself, share it around!

## Prayers

Lord God, we thank you for all those who radiate a sincere joy that shine from within,  
and we pray that their joy may be contagious.

Help each of us to find joy even in the midst of adversity. May your Holy Spirit speak to our hearts through  
this series on Philippians in the weeks ahead, so that we are strengthened and encouraged.

Lord in your mercy;

**Hear our prayer.**

Heavenly Father, your servant Paul felt thankful every time he remembered his friends in Philippi.

We now take a moment to thank you for the people who are special to us.

Help us to convey our appreciation for them, and to simply enjoy the love and unity that exists.

Lord in your mercy;

**Hear our prayer.**

We pray for our nation at this time. We pray for the vaccination program to be effective, and wisely  
conducted. We pray that you will bring us the gift of patience, to bear with one another through this new  
time of lockdown, remembering that we are making sacrifices for the sake of the common good.

Guide your church to be effective in proclaiming the love of Jesus in word and action. May your Holy Spirit  
inspire creativity, so that the love of Jesus is still practised and made known despite the current restrictions.

Lord in your mercy;

**Hear our prayer.**

We pray now for people we can think of who are really struggling to feel joy at the present time...

May the light of Jesus shine on them. May your heavenly perspective come to them,  
and let them find encouragement through the fellowship and support of others.

Lord in your mercy;

**Hear our prayer.**

**Keep us, good Lord,  
under the shadow of your mercy  
in this time of uncertainty and distress.  
Sustain and support the anxious and fearful,  
and lift up all who are brought low;  
that we may rejoice in your comfort  
knowing that nothing can separate us from your love  
in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.**