

New Years Day 2021
Philippians 4, 10-13

I rejoiced greatly in the Lord that at last you renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you were concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. 11 I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. 12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. 13 I can do all this through him who gives me strength.

Dear sisters and brothers,

As a teenager I love this text. "I can do all things through Him who gives me strength, Jesus Christ!" This text at many an occasion gave me the courage to take up challenges that seemed almost too big for me. Looking at Paul and other people of faith, I said: "Christ can help me!"

Now that I'm no longer a teenager I ask myself, to what extent this text really is true. I think of our current situation and the challenges that we are facing. I think of the lockdown and the nine months during which we could not attend services.

Would Paul have written these words, if he had lived today? Would he have said these words this morning as we start the new year under the cloud of Corona?

I always encourage people to do the daily Bible readings, I also encourage you to then occasionally read up more background to what you are reading. Uncle Google is a great help in this regard.

When you study the background to texts, they often become even more alive and they really bring a strong message if you understand the context in which they were written. The same applies here.

Let me ask again: Can Paul really say, "I can do all things through Him who gives me strength", or are these the words of a young of a young man who doesn't know how difficult life can be?

Well, looking at the context, it is clear that Paul is writing these words, not from a guesthouse while journeying and on holiday, but from prison. He's been imprisoned for the umpteenth time. And in this prison situation, he

writes these words. This is not theory. And when he says, "I have learned to be contempt", this is not a humble, pious way of saying: "I accept everything that comes my way".

These words are from a man who really had to suffer a lot, went through times much worse than I can ever imagine. It is in these circumstances that Paul writes these letters.

We are now in lockdown. We must keep in mind that these words were written by someone who was literally locked down, locked away, someone who could not attend services, who could not worship with his fellow believers, because he was behind bars, behind bars in the Roman Empire's time. This meant: hardly any food, perhaps bread and water once a day, no fresh clothes, miserable circumstances. When Paul says, I know what it is to be in need, I have learned to be hungry, He is most probably speaking from his experience right there and then. In this situation he says, I can do all things through Him, who gives me strength.

What is it that give him strength? Of course he says it: "Christ Jesus Himself". The wonderful thing about our faith, is that no law can stop us from praying. No bars, no lockdown can stop me from talking to the Lord. So even in the deepest prison, Paul knew, Christ is there.

But that is not the only thing. Again the context becomes important. Paul writes to the Philippians thanking them for the help that he has received.

When the Philippians heard that Paul was imprisoned in Ephesus, (which wasn't too far, only about four or five days journey), they decided to send one of their members, Epaphroditus, to go to serve Paul in prison. It was possible for prisoners to be cared for, to receive additional food, to receive fresh clothes and have the old clothes washed. And so, Epaphroditus was sent to Paul to take care of him. And it is in this caring, that Paul discovers the love and the care of fellow Christians. It is this caring, that really makes him strong. It is because of this caring, that he can come to the conclusion, I can do all things through Him, who gives me strength, Christ Jesus.

When I was young, I saw this text as a statement of a strong man, a man of faith, saying, if I believe I can do anything. But now I realise this text is a text of someone who knows that he is being carried. He sees chance to move forward. He is carried, not only because of his faith but carried by the faith and the care of others. When he speaks about Christ who helps him he

does not only think of his own personal relationship to Christ. No, he is very much aware of Christ working through others, Christ working through the Philippians, Christ working through Epaphroditus. And because he experienced Christ in this multi faceted way, he says that he can cope.

In this lockdown period many of us have experienced how our faith goes into crisis. We miss the services we miss the fellowship, and this affects the way in which we personally relate to God. Some of you have become stronger but for many, and I include myself, it was really tough and still is tough. Somehow God seems so distant, so far away.

In such times we need to find ways of fellowship, ways of doing Epaphroditus ministry. Despite lockdown, despite all the limitations of travel, we need to find ways for fellowship, even if it is not physical. The online services do help, and the circular letters sent by the bishop or by the pastors, do help us. But what really makes a difference is when someone speaks to me personally, when I realise that I have been seen. I am taken seriously. I am important to others. That's when I suddenly realised I am carried. This carrying can happen through a phone call. It can happen through WhatsApp, through an SMS, an email in which I am not merely cc'd, but addressed specifically. The caring becomes special when I realise, someone is thinking of me.

We need to find ways of doing this. When I say "we", it implies that I need to ask myself where I can become an Epaphroditus to someone else, where someone else needs this special attention.

It is in this combination of my personal relationship to God and my fellowship with fellow Christians that I become strong, that Christ is at work.

One last thought about Epaphroditus. After being with Paul for a time he became seriously ill (2,26,27) to such an extent that they feared that he was dying. Now I can imagine two things happening. Paul would have tried to help as much as possible from within prison, trying to assist wherever he could. And at the same time Epaphroditus feeling even worse because he was sent to help, but now had become a burden to the one who's supposed to be helped. How terrible must he have felt!

But actually, this is where the secret of Christian Fellowship lies. It is not about a few strong Christians, carrying everybody else. It is about people

carrying each other when they are strong, and then being carried, when they can't carry. So it's not about you becoming a Epaphroditus and staying an Epaphroditus forever. No. Sometimes you are called to carry others. And at other times you need to allow others to carry you.

It is this alternating between sometimes carrying and sometimes being carried that makes out the essence of us as Christians. I'm not always strong. But even when I'm weak, I can become someone who carries.

My prayer for the year that lies ahead is, that we will experience that the Lord is there, personally, in our own relationship with him. More than that, my prayer is that we will experience fellowship and seek ways of finding fellowship, of becoming Epaphroditus when needed, and of receiving the help of Epaphroditus when offered. Through this relationship with Christ, and with Christians, especially during lockdown, we will receive the courage and the strength to face 2021.

May 2021 become a blessed year because of Christ is with us - directly in our prayers, and directly through our brothers and sisters!

Amen.

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