**A Sermon Outline: *Philippians 1:1-12***

On **Home Mission Sunday**, we invite you all to celebrate the diverse and varied family of churches that we are a part of giving thanks to God for our partnership together in bearing witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in our communities and across South Wales.

Home Mission is intended to stimulate and support churches, people and ministries that are seeking to reach out to their communities, often in new, innovative and creative ways. It’s part of our Baptist DNA that we believe “*that it is the duty of every disciple to bear personal witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and to take part in the evangelisation of the world*.” We don’t do this alone or in isolation. We do it in partnership with one another across our Baptist Family and sometimes along with other like-minded churches in our local area.

Partnership in the gospel is evidence of the work of God amongst us. When we resist or deny our partnership in the gospel, we risk denying or resisting the work that God is doing amongst us. He has called us with together in local congregations with all our wonderful diversity and richness to be witnesses of the truth and power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. A gospel that we share together and that unites us around our common confession of faith.

Together, he has called us to serve his purposes for the sake of the gospel of his Son. To be a sign of hope pointing towards God’s faithful presence on earth and the salvation offered through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is marked by its joy-filled tone throughout. And it begins with Paul declaring that joy shapes his prayers when he thinks of the Philippians.

“*I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now*…”

And so, how might we go on praying with joy for one another because of this partnership that we share together in the gospel…?

1. **We pray with joy for one another when we recognise that it is God who is still present and freely active amongst us.**

It’s all too easy for us to become preoccupied and overwhelmed by the demands of our own local church and the daily challenges we face. Often, we have little time for much else. It’s tough right now for many churches. Many feel they are just about hanging on longing to see God move again and bring increase and growth.

We have become so anxious and concerned about our programmes that we struggle to find time to pause, to look up and out beyond the boundaries of our own church to see again that God is still with us. He remains faithful to his people.

God is still at work across our churches. He is also at work in our communities beyond the life of our churches. So, we need to give thanks for this, recover our joy and pray with our sisters and brothers celebrating the God who still dwells amongst us.

Because we enjoy God’s enduring faithfulness to us in our own situations, so in turn we are shaped by the character of God to express our own commitment and faithfulness to our sisters and brothers across the life of our churches. We therefore have a joyful responsibility to pray for and support one another if we can. We are part of the same family under God.

Here in Philippians, Paul reminds us of the God who is at work in all kinds of places and in all kinds of churches. Churches who are seeking to live lives of faithful discipleship as followers of Christ and being witnesses wherever God has placed them. He refers to his readers in verse 1 as “*God’s holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi*”, a people called and set apart by God for his purposes. A people in whom the Spirit of God dwells and through whom God makes known his presence to the world. A people united by their common faith and their baptismal confession of their Lord and Saviour, and their commitment to being disciples and followers of Jesus.

To take time to pay attention and give thanks for what God is doing elsewhere is to recognise that God is still faithfully present and active in the rich variety of expressions and places that we find ourselves in South Wales, all for the sake of the gospel. Whatever struggles we are facing, we deny this at our peril.

Taking time to recognise that God is freely active amongst us, that we are sisters and brothers called by God our Father and empowered by God’s Spirit for the sake of the gospel is good for the life of our churches. It’s also good for our souls. We recognise and give thanks for all that see of God in one another, both individually and corporately in the life of our churches. God is still amongst us. We all “*share together in God’s grace”* (verse 7b). Hallelujah!!

1. **We pray with joy for one another when we recognise our common calling to share and live out the gospel in the life of our local churches.**

But again, even when we recognise God’s faithfulness, we still can find that church can be hard work! Not only can we lose sight of God’s faithful presence amongst us, we can also lose sight of our calling to live faithful, holy lives and to share the gospel within our local communities. Never mind our calling to share it to the ends of the earth! Well, at the least across South Wales!

We need to give thanks for our churches – however fragile they might be – because they remain signs of God’s faithfulness and a means by which people might hear the gospel and come to know the risen Christ. Our churches, however small and fragile, hopefully still seek to keep “*the rumour of God alive*” in their communities.

Lesslie Newbigin, the missionary and theologian, put it well in his book - *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society -* when he wrote: “*The only possible hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation which believes it*.” In other words, the only way people will truly come to understand the power of the gospel is when they see it being lived out passionately and faithfully by local congregations of God’s people – faithful and loving followers and disciples of Jesus.

Paul knew and believed from his distant prison cell that the Philippian church was God’s kingdom outpost, a living, breathing expression of the gospel and the power of God. Why would he not go on giving thanks and praying for them? He knew that his task and calling was no different to their task and calling – to live lives consistent with the gospel and to be witnesses to the glorious gospel of Christ!

We need to go on praying for one another that our lives would be worthy of the calling that we have received. That our lives would be expressions of the life that has been given to us by God through his Spirit. Christlike communities of faith revealing to the world in our own relationships of love and obedience something of the life of the Kingdon of God.

We need to pray for one another and give thanks so that our lives might go on communicating the life of faith in Christ. We must go on praying for one another so that we might have the courage to share our lives and our faith as we live in our local communities and with whoever we find ourselves with.

That we… “*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*.” (verse 10b-11)

1. **We pray with joy for one another when we trust in God’s faithfulness to complete that which he has started amongst us.**

One more time - some of us in our churches are finding things tough. The future for many of our churches looks more uncertain than ever.

In recent years more churches have seen decline rather than growth. Covid for many has only accelerated this. Congregations are ageing. Young people are leaving and have already left. Many families have either stopped coming or have relocated to other churches leaving many of our churches without the joy that children bring and also anxiety about what this means for the church’s future. The cost-of-living crisis has squeezed budgets. We give thanks for our churches seeing blessing and growth. How can we support and encourage those who aren’t seeing much growth?

Struggling churches can find it hard to know what to do. Some get so caught up with just keeping the building up and running, they have little time for anything else. Others feel a great pressure to keep their existing members happy that they have little time or energy to reach out in new ways to build relationships with people outside the life of the church so that they might get to know them better and to bless them in the name of Christ.

Pauls words to the Philippians in verse 6 should therefore come as a great comfort to us: “…*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*.”

This, of course, should not be used as an excuse for complacency. It can be too easy to use the promises of God’s faithfulness as excuses for our inward, self-centred turn and our growing preoccupation with self-preservation and the comfort of familiar routines. The reality is that some of our churches will face closure. These are hard decisions and not taken easily. But the closure of a church does not mean God’s promise to finish his work has failed. God is not bound by the ups and downs of local church life.

Paul’s confidence flowed out of his knowledge that the Philippians remained an outward looking and engaged gospel community of faith, hope and love. They courageously and daringly lived out their radical faith in such a way that their neighbours and friends took notice.

As we saw earlier, in verse 10 Paul tells them and us, the substance of his prayer: “*that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God*.” But this flows from the first part – “*that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight*…”

God’s faithfulness to his people is rooted in our commitment to go on loving and to being a community of Christlike love: Loving God with everything we have and loving our neighbours – those beyond the community of faith – with the same generosity, mercy and grace that we have known in Christ.

Love remains the measure of our life together. Love for God. Love for all of God’s people. And love for the lost. In those toughest of moments when we question God’s faithfulness, we again choose to love. To love the God is who is faithful and to love those we share our loves with. And we can go on loving because although the work of God is not yet complete, the promise to us today and tomorrow and until that day is that God will complete the work he has begun in us. We remain ever hopeful. Ever faithful. And therefore, ever loving.

Paul concludes his letter to the Philippians with this exhortation: (Phil 4:4-9)

*4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice! 5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8 Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. 9 Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you*.

This is our partnership together in the gospel. This is our joyful prayer for one another. This is the good work of God that he will carry onto completion until the day of Christ.

May God bless us, may he bless all his people, this day and forever more.