

Brancepeth sermon
28 June 2026

Philippians 1:3-6

Matthew 10:40-end

Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18

May I speak in the name of God,

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

Amen.

I want to begin this morning, a little unusually,

by telling you a bit about my work, up at the University,

where I teach in the Theology and Religion department.

As well as the normal teaching and marking, and marking, and marking,

I also have a role in what is called the ‘Common Awards’ partnership.

You see Durham University is what we call

the ‘validating institution’ for much of the Church of England’s

ministerial training around the country.

That is, there's a team in the university – the team I lead
– which is responsible for checking the academic standards
at nearly all the institutions around the country
where new Anglican clergy are trained,
before they get ordained.

And we actually work with various other churches, as well –
the Methodists, the United Reformed Church, some Baptists, and so on.
Now saying that we're 'responsible for checking academic standards'
could make us sound a bit like OFSTED,
and it's true that we do conduct inspection visits;
to check up on how things are going,
and make sure standards are being adhered to.

But, we never turn up unannounced,
and our ethos, nearly all the time, is
to work *with* the institutions we validate;
to build a relationship with them over time,
to make sure we know the staff,
make sure we understand what they are trying to do,
and the conditions under which they are trying to do it,

and to make sure that if there do turn out to be any problems,
we can approach them collaboratively, as far as possible.

And the reason I'm telling you all this is that,
when I first started doing this job, thirteen years ago now,
I realised as I went round on all these visits, all these inspections,
that there was a very powerful tool that I could use –
a tool that cost me nothing, but that could make all the difference.
I realised that one of the most powerful things I could do
was simply to *thank* people –
to *thank* the staff in the institutions we visited
for all the work that they were doing.

And I have to say that I quickly came to love this aspect of my job.
To go into an institution whose staff
often feel hard-pressed and beleaguered,
who feel under scrutiny, under judgment, so much of the time,
and simply to *thank* them for the effort they put in,
for the care they put in, for their creativity and their diligence –
and to make *that* the keynote of our interactions with them.

Now, this is something I'd learnt from people
who have made a point of thanking me,
and it's a real pleasure to pass it on –
and to let it lay the foundation for all the rest
of the work we do with the institutions we visit.

And so I love our reading from Philippians,
in which Paul tells the Christians in Philippi that
he thanks *God* every time he remembers them –
and by telling them that, he effectively thanks *them*, too.

Paul begins his whole message to them,
sets the foundation for everything else he has to say to them,
with this expression of *thanks* –
and that's not just something he does in this one letter;
it seems to have been a characteristic of his way of communicating.

And he doesn't just say his thanks and move on;
he tells them *why* he thanks God for them.

He thanks God for their 'sharing in the gospel
from the first day until now', he says.

The Christians in Philippi, he is saying,
have joined with him in the work of the gospel,
joined with him in his mission as an apostle.

And I don't think he has in mind here just those who
joined him in the obvious public work of the gospel –
with teaching, with proclamation, with public disputation –
I don't think he's just talking about
the likes of Silas, Barnabas, and Luke
who have that kind of visible ministry alongside him.

I think he's also talking about those who made their homes available,
those who provided catering,
those who provided financial support,
those who prayed,
those who sent him letters,
those who encouraged him
those who thanked him.

All of those people were, in their own ways, 'sharing in the gospel'
– that is, they were 'sharing in the good news',

sharing in the work of making the good news a reality
in people's lives.

And Paul goes on to say that he knows that *God is at work in them*.

And he knows that God is at work in them
precisely because they *do* join in,
these Christians in Philippi,
in all these different ways, with the work of the gospel.
Paul knows that all good things come from God,
and so he knows that, if the people he is writing to are
involved in any way at all with the work of the gospel,
if they are making any kind of contribution to the
ongoing work of spreading the good news,
and of making the good news a reality in people's lives,
well - that work must come from God at work in them.

And, again, we know from what he says elsewhere
that he does not just think that about those
who do big, dramatic things, those who speak in public,
those who have highly visible ministries,
those in whose ministry miracles take place;

he also thinks it of those who help,
those who support, those who administer,
those who give and pray and encourage and thank –
For Paul, the Philippian Christians can do all of that, any of that
only because God is at work in them and through them.

God is ultimately the one who awakens and shapes their motivation.

God is ultimately the one who provides
the skills, the resources, the opportunities that they need.

God is the one who sustains them while they work.

God is the one who makes their work fruitful.

So, yes, he thanks them for their work in support of the gospel,
and he also thanks God for being at work *in* them,
for being at work *through* them,
as they do *their* work.

And Paul knows, of course, that the people he is writing to
are themselves works in progress.

They are imperfect, and sometimes misguided;
they are sometimes argumentative and sometimes pig-headed;

they are sometimes weak-willed and sometimes distracted.
He knows that they work in imperfect circumstances,
often overwhelmed by other demands;
he knows that they are sometimes too exhausted
to do what they want,
and that they have limited resources to draw on.
But he knows that God works in and through
these very imperfect vessels,
these not very impressive vessels –
what he calls elsewhere ‘earthen vessels’ –
in fact God *only* works through such imperfect, unimpressive vessels,
because they are the only material God has *available* to work with.
But just because they are imperfect and unimpressive,
just because the support they offer for the work of the gospel
is faltering, unevenly effective,
and sometimes a bit of a mess –
well, that doesn’t mean it’s not God at work.
It doesn’t mean that God isn’t to be thanked,
or that the people involved aren’t to be thanked.

God *is* at work in them,

and God *will* bring this work to completion, in God's own way.

And that brings us to Jesus' words, in our gospel reading.

He is talking to his disciples,

those who are sharing in the work of the gospel with him –

whether that is by going out and teaching, healing and exorcising,

or whether it's more a matter of acting as the support crew,

helping keep the show on the road,

keeping people fed and watered and clothed,

making sure people know where to be and when,

making sure that they've signed up for the catering rota –

people sharing in all kinds of ways in the work of the gospel.

And Jesus says that when they do that work,

and other people respond to them doing that work –

when other people *receive*

those who share in the work of the gospel with him –

well: they are really receiving him.

So if you share in the work of the gospel,
falteringly, unevenly, imperfectly –
if you share in the work of telling people about Jesus,
if you share in the work of loving people the way Jesus loves them,
if you share in the work of living out a life that echoes Jesus' life,
whether you do that in big and obvious ways,
or in the small, almost invisible actions of helping,
supporting, encouraging, thanking –
and even if you're still very much a work in progress as you do so –
when you share in the work of the gospel in any of these ways,
and people receive that work from you *as* good news,
receive it *as* love, *as* kindness, *as* support,
receive it *as* gratitude or encouragement,
well, then they are receiving Jesus from you and through you.

When we support one another,
whether within this one congregation,
or with other local churches,
or across the wider networks of which our church is a part,

or across the international links
that weave together churches in different countries;
when we support one another in the work of the gospel,
whether that's in teaching or in financial support or in catering
or in encouragement or in friendship or in practical care
or in any number of other ways,
however much that work is a work in progress,
it is Jesus working in us and through us;
we are receiving Jesus' love from one another's hands.

When we do that -
when we help out at Messy Church,
when we put chairs out for an event,
when we help with the catering for Ros's welcome service,
when we give in support of the Durham-Lesotho link -
our small actions, unimpressive though they may be on their own,
are caught up in something bigger than themselves;
we are caught up in something much bigger than *ourselves*;
we are carried along by something more powerful than ourselves;
something bigger than us is at work in us and through us.

The little we can offer may seem small;
it may seem ineffective;
it may seem hardly to be worth noticing,
but it is part of what *God* is doing;
it is part of the life that *Jesus* is sharing with us and through us.

So if Paul were standing here, he would be able say to you, too:
I thank my God every time I remember *you*,
constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you,
because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now.

And I am confident of this:
that the one who began a good work among you
will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

Amen.