

Over the coming year we shall be delving into a different book of the Bible every two months. In January and February we looked through the book of Genesis. Two weeks ago, Paul got us started with the book of Philippians and so we'll be looking at that tonight and for the next two Traditional Evening Services. Let's briefly think about the background to the letter.

Philippi is now a ruined city in the north-east of Greece. It was originally called Crenides, but it was renamed by Philip II of Macedon in 356BC. His son was perhaps more famous than he was: Alexander the Great. Philippi was a prosperous place, as it was on the main road (the Egnatian Way) from Rome to Byzantium which we now call Istanbul.

We read about the Church being formed by Paul and Silas in Acts 16 in c.49AD. Around 12 years later, Paul was under house arrest in Rome and so the Church in Philippi sent him a gift to encourage him. We think that this epistle is Paul replying to them and aiming to encourage too as the Church in Philippi was having a tough time too.

There's quite a lot that makes us distinctive as individuals. Perhaps our hobbies? They might have to do with craftwork, gaining knowledge, volunteering in different places, reading non-fiction books, listening to or making music, technology, sport (yea for Formula 1 starting again today!) or looking after your family.

Looking around I know that we also have a lot of similarities in the way we might do things or the way we think. Our parents would have taught us to be polite, saying please and thank you. We might eat similar food. We all live within 5 miles of this church building. We've all had or have several good friendships in our lives so far. We all want to understand more about following God and knowing Him as our Master and Friend as we sang earlier.

In our first reading in verse 27, the Church was told to “stand firm in one Spirit” and “to strive together as one for the faith of the gospel.” Steko is the Greek verb for standing firm, to stand erect and to persevere. It’s derived from another Greek word which means to be stationary. Sunathleo is made up of two Greek words which mean to ‘to wrestle in company with.’ That’s why we figuratively read it as working or striving together with someone else. I’m sharing my struggle with someone else or cooperating vigorously with someone else.

Other versions to confirm this:

I will keep on hearing good reports that you are standing side by side with one strong purpose—to tell the Good News (*TLB*)

I will know that you are standing together with one spirit and one purpose, fighting together for the faith, (*NLT*)

I may hear this of you: that you are standing firm in united spirit *and* purpose, striving side by side *and* contending with a single mind for the faith of the glad tidings (the Gospel). (*Amplified*)

I will hear about you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, working side by side for the faith that comes from the gospel, (*HCSB*)

Helping each other is definitely a beautiful, honourable and positive thing to do. It’s often quite easy to do this when you’ve been married for many years or you’ve had a close friend for a long time. You simply know the other person so well that you can read the signs, like their body language. You can share the burden that the other person has and things certainly get easier.

Talking to friends, family and spouses, if we have one. are all brilliant and we definitely need to work on those relationships and not take them for granted.

Considering our second reading, there is Someone else that we should all be turning to on a daily basis that I haven’t mentioned in detail yet. Whatever sort of day we’re having this other Person is Someone we can listen to and speak to wherever we are.

In 1995, Princess Diana said in an interview with a journalist that there were three people in her marriage with Prince Charles. That caused quite a storm and was seen very negatively by most people.

I've been married to Gill for 2,697 days (nearly 7.5 years) and you might be shocked to hear that there have been three people in our marriage since day one! It's not an extramarital affair. God is at the centre of our marriage and at the centre of our lives. We really want to know God better ourselves and we want the same for the other person too. It's very important to us.

Jesus tells us to come to Him and to take His yoke upon us. That sounds quite negative to some people. "Hang about with Jesus all the time being what to do. No thanks!" they might say.

It's not like that at all. God made us and made the earth. When we follow His ways and His laws then life is at its best. When we are selfish and live our lives mainly to please ourselves, then life is far from being great and wonderful.

Two oxen might wear a yoke together. It was a long piece of wood with leather straps. They might pull a plough together and the yoke would allow them to share the burden between them. It's easier to learn from Jesus when we ask Him to yoke us up to Himself. Generally an experienced animal is yoked to a younger animal and this younger and inexperienced animal learns a lot from the other over several days and weeks. They walk at the same pace around the field together. Havoc would be caused if two young animals were yoked together!

I'm not a doggie person, but a long lead doesn't seem great.

As we come to God and allow Him to walk through life with us, so we can learn so much. Sometimes God might quicken us up or might slow us down. Sometimes He might take us to places we hadn't expected to visit.

We are not alone. God hasn't left us as orphans. God is with us. He invites us to walk through life with Him learning about what is good for souls and spirits. As we remember what He said and what He did in the Bible, so we can decide to follow His teachings and follow His example to us.

God's yoke is easy and His burden is light. As we stand with each other in the ups and downs of life, so let us invite God to be part of our lives too. Let Him be our Master, Lord and Guide. Let God put His yoke upon us. Let's live as one with Him. As you get up tomorrow pray that God will lead you and then let Him. Listen to what He says to you throughout the day.

Pray that God will lead you. It's a good prayer to pray everyday!