

## Sermon by Rev David Thiem

Lent 2 – Wesley 9am – 21<sup>st</sup> February 2016

Theme: “Stand firm in the Lord”

Readings: Psalm 27 & Philippians 3:17 -4:1

Text: “Therefore, my brothers and sisters, you whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends.”  
Philippians 4:1

### Introduction

Prior to looking at this set Epistle reading for this Sunday let us have a very brief overview of the letter.

It was written by the Apostle Paul, probably from Rome, where he was a prisoner, under house arrest, because of his Christian faith. Hence the date is around 61AD. There is discussion amongst scholars but this is the likely scenario for authorship and date. Paul’s primary reason for writing the letter was to thank the Christians in Philippi for the gift they had sent him upon learning of his detention in Rome. Paul also uses this letter as a pastoral occasion to encourage this small faith community to stand firm in their faith in the midst of the persecution that was happening to those who were followers of Jesus and to rejoice regardless of the circumstances. Also Paul encourages them in their faith to stay united and warns them about extremists in the faith, both the legalists and the libertines.

The city of Philippi, in Macedonia, was a prosperous Roman colony, with many of its inhabitants being expat Romans who spoke Latin. Probably almost all would have been ‘Gentile Christians’ rather than Jews who accepted Jesus as the Christ. It is into this scenario that we read Philippians 3:17-4:1

### Philippians 3:17-4:1

Paul begins this passage with the words:

“Join with others in following my example, brothers and sisters, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you.” vs 17

Another version of Scripture reads;

“Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.”

For many Protestants, shaped by Luther and Calvin’s theology they are wary of the notion of ‘imitation’, as if Paul as an early follower and evangelist is suggesting that Jesus was a moral exemplar, who like other heroic figures, is to be imitated so we may earn our own salvation. Luther famously called such efforts by the derisive name of “works righteousness”. The worry over making the Gospel into a form of moralism is quite legitimate. It seems to fling salvation by grace alone through faith alone right out the window. If Jesus is primarily a figure whose image we are meant to copy and model ourselves, then the question naturally arises: Why not the Buddha or Confucius, why not Muhammad or Gandhi?

Yet the imitation theme in Scripture is undeniable. Paul urges the Philippians to imitate him, even as he himself imitates Christ Jesus. As inheritors of ancient notions about learning and thus about discipleship, both Jesus and the Apostle Paul know that true moral and spiritual tutelage under a master – learning to follow the habits and practices of one who has become proficient in a particular trade or skill is most important. Think of Jesus’ disciples who followed him for three years! Indeed, the precise meaning of disciple is a learner or a pupil. Like all other Christians, therefore, Paul is a pupil of Christ and thus an imitator of him. He calls the Christians at Philippi to do and be the same.

What makes Jesus different is found in the next verses.

“For, as I have often told you before and now say even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is the stomach, and their glory is shame. Their mind is on earthly things.” Vss18-19

It is this ugly instrument of suffering and shame that sets Christ qualitatively apart. Whereas all other great teachers and moral exemplars are devoted to noble human ends that are to be achieved by noble human means, the cross is the uniquely divine end known as the kingdom of God. All human visions of justice and peace finally fail if they do not resort to force and coercion, whereupon they destroy peace and corrupt justice. The company of the cross is the one community that makes an instrument of worldly powerlessness and defeat its central emblem and banner. This is the craziness of following and being imitators of Christ – our symbol of victory is a symbol usually associated with defeat, the end and misery and hopelessness. This is the folly of the way of the cross to which we are called.

Paul reminds the Philippians that their citizenship is ‘in heaven’.

While the Philippians were proud of their status as citizens of Rome, Paul reminded them that there is a better citizenship to be had. There is a greater Lord than Caesar. This Lord is the cross bearer who is now glorified and eternal. Here we have the crux of what got the early church into so much trouble and persecution. They would only worship Christ as their Lord and not Caesar.

Paul spells this out for them and calls them to ‘stand firm in their faith’. Here is the Lenten challenge for us.

What does it mean for us to ‘stand firm in our faith today?’

Let me give you a couple of minutes to reflect on this for yourself and for the church in our society.

1. At work
2. In our leisure time
3. Our politics
4. Our relationships with others
5. Our sense of social justice
6. In our families

Here we have the challenge of this Epistle, written so long ago, yet still relevant for us in our lives here and now.

Let me conclude with a paraphrase of Psalm 27 by Bruce Prewer which calls us to stand firm in our faith.

*God is my light and my good health, what evil can intimidate me?  
God is the steel in my life, what can overwhelm me?  
When scumbags make a move on me, like crocodiles to eat me up,  
it is these ruthless enemies that shall stumble and fall.  
Though a mob pitch in against me, my heart will not fear.  
Though they make war on me my confidence will not be shaken.  
I ask God for one thing, that thing I really crave:  
to live in the household of God every day of my life,  
to delight in God’s beauty and search in his temple.  
This much I truly believe, that I shall see God’s goodness.  
In the land of the ever-living I shall be strong and pin my hopes on God.  
Yes my brave heart, hope in God!*