



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
3 Stanmore Bay Road,
Whangaparaoa, Auckland, N.Z.
www.ststephenswgp.org.nz

Don't Be Anxious

Philippians 4:4-7

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Advent is a time of promise. We are waiting for the return of our King. This is a real hope and a real event which we anticipate with joy. It is not just a nice religious idea, not just pie in the sky.

Jesus has promised to return and we are waiting for him. But not waiting in the sense of sitting back in the deck chair, eating potato chips and drinking a long, cool glass of something you enjoy. No, we have an assignment to complete, as we wait for his return, and we have the certainty that Jesus is someone who fulfils his promises. Our assignment is laid out in Matthew's gospel 28:19 – we are to make disciples, baptise them and teach them to obey Jesus. But Jesus went back to heaven nearly 2000 years ago – how do we know he will keep the promise to return? He made it so long ago.

Promises are easy to make, but not necessarily easy to follow through. George Stephanopolous, a US political commentator famously said, "The President has kept all the promises he intended to keep."¹ If someone makes you a promise, you do well to think about the character of this person. Is he trustworthy? Has he kept promises before, even when it cost him to keep them? Well, I have walked with the Lord long enough to know that he is faithful to his promises and loving towards all he has made. I know the character of the person who made the promise to return.

Another promise was read to us in the Epistle reading today – Phil 4:7. Let's open to page 1145 of your pew Bible. "*And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*"

"Peace on earth, goodwill to everyone." That is what we are hoping for at this time of the year, but it often turns out that the stress of the build-up to Christmas actually means many people get grumpier and their friends and families get less and less peaceful!

Many people know this promise of peace in Philippians 4, but not many realise in what context Paul wrote it down. This promise of peace in Philippians is set in the context of a church quarrel. Two women were arguing and disagreeing with each other, so much so that their quarrel has been remembered for nearly 2000 years! Paul felt it so significant a disagreement for him to mention them by name and urge them to agree with one another in the Lord. He talks about those whose "names are in the book of life," so he does not say they are disqualified from being Christians by their behaviour, but that they need to address the problem properly.

It is especially important within the church to mend relationships, in the light of Jesus saying, "A kingdom divided among itself will fall." (Matt 12 :25) Paul's next few comments may be taken as how he expected these people to go about mending the relationships. It is easy to take these verses out of their context and use them only in an individualistic manner, "If I refuse to be anxious, if I pray and am thankful, then I will get peace in my heart." That of course is true, but here Paul is talking in the context of a serious quarrel between two people.

We are intended to work on things together, as the body of Christ, not operating as solo Christians. Jesus expects us to do the hard work to keep up good relationships. This is the sort of thing that pleases the Lord as we wait for his coming.

¹ Simon Ponsonby "God is for us" p40

He tells a parable elsewhere about servants who are waiting for their master to return and start beating up other servants and getting drunk. Needless to say, the master is not impressed when he returns.

So let's look at how Paul lays the foundation for peace in the church as well as peace in individual hearts. (Page 1145 in the pew Bibles).

Most translations would have Phil 4:4 starting a new paragraph, but I think it is worth considering whether Paul may have intended these words to help the quarrel be resolved. V4 says "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!" Rejoice in THE LORD. Be delighted in him. Not so long ago, I sat down at home after a morning service. I said something like, "That went badly. I feel miserable about it. Maybe we've got nothing more to give and we should move on."

Straight away Ian grabbed my arm and said, "Enough of that, let's praise the Lord!" and we danced around the room together singing something like, "The Lord is good, the Lord is good, the Lord is good and I love him." By the time we had gotten around the room, the gremlins had disappeared!

Our focus is Jesus and what a delightful person he is. This takes our focus off whether we are in the right, whether our feelings are hurt, any tendency to judge the other person or in my case, whether we are adequate to the task.

If everyone is showing gentleness to each other as Paul encourages us, and rejoicing in the Lord rather than insisting on their own way, we have a much better chance of peace and harmony.

Then Paul says, "The Lord is near." This may be a reminder that we need to be ready when the Lord returns, not quarrelling amongst each other, or it may be a reminder that the Lord is close to us, he is not just a God who sits up in heaven enjoying himself and sending messages via courier. He is close at hand and he understands the ins and outs of every situation we face.

Then Paul uses the "A" word. "Do not be anxious," he says. One definition of anxiety is: "self-centred, counter-productive worry." That sounds quite shocking, doesn't it? "Self-centred, counter-productive worry." I hope it makes you think as much as it did me when I read that. Anxiety is not little fluffy pet which we can afford to keep and stroke and bring out to look at when there's nothing else to do. Anxiety masquerades as a small fluffy pet but it grows into a giant, threatening beast if you feed it. That is why God says, "Don't be anxious," because it grows and takes on a life of its own.

Galatians 5v16-22 is another angle – Paul talks about the sinful nature which wars with the Spirit inside us, so that we do not do what we want. He urges us to hold God's hand and keep in step with the Spirit of God, rather than taking notice of this anxiety which calls out so insistently.

Anxiety is one of the most common diseases of soul that doctors are consulted about these days. In stressful situations, we all get concerned and that's completely normal. If we have money problems or if a loved one is sick, we can feel stressed and worried.

If we see an item on TV that is disturbing, such as a terror attack, we feel horror, temporary distress and dismay, yet most of us continue with our activities and can put it out of our minds. Other people have greater degrees of reaction. They feel battered and consumed with anxiety. This can come to anyone, and is becoming more and more of a problem in today's world. Sometimes it is because people started paying more attention to their feelings and perceptions than to the Word of God and did not know how to access the healing and comfort of God.

However, Paul here brings us God's instruction: "Do not be anxious." That means, do not dwell on anxious thoughts and allow them to get bigger and bigger in your mind, to take over, to become habits of negative thinking, to wear tracks in your brain. He says, "No matter what is happening, rejoice in the Lord, and refuse to allow anxiety to be the focus. The Lord is near, so pray to him. That can be as simple as "Help!" Ask him for what you need. Be specific about what you would like; don't just moan about the hard time you are having.

And most of all, thank him for all the good things he has blessed you with. Ask for an attitude of gratitude.

Spend time searching for all the things you can be grateful for – even down to taps that produce water. The result, Paul says, is that the peace of God will guard your minds and hearts.

It is important to get in early with the rejoicing and praying and thanking, before sinful habits of anxiety grow and peace becomes hard to find. There is a parallel with bodily sickness, say, nausea. If you know something will make you nauseous, you avoid even the first contact with it. Once nausea becomes established, it is hard to get rid of.

So you refuse to go down the path of anxiety. One time years ago when I was walking past a woman during a prayer meeting, I had a mental picture. It was of a golden fire-screen at the top of an escalator, which was going down into blackness. When I talked to her later, I asked what was happening for her at that time in the prayer meeting. "Oh," she said. "I was looking at a picture in my head which was of an escalator going down into darkness." So I was able to say to her, "God knows that you are facing an escalator which would take you down into depression, but he is putting up a

golden screen at the top so that you won't be carried inevitably downwards." She was very grateful, as she had a history of severe depression and at that time did not go down her well-worn track.

The peace of God can protect us in just that way. When Paul says, "Peace will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus," "guard" is a military term. It means shield. Peace will garrison, guard, protect, shield your heart and mind. If you have peace about a situation, there is no need to worry about it. You may spend time praying about it, but the underlying flavour of your prayer will be trusting prayer. You will feel as though you are in a safe place, guarded by the Lord and his peace.

Sometimes it takes a while to get to that point if the problem is large or continues a long time. We are talking about a process here.

And when Paul gives these instructions, we *can* apply them individually, but he is speaking to them to a group. We as the body of Christ, are in this together and we need to help and remind each other to rejoice, pray, and be thankful.

If you are concerned about a particular relationship that does not have peace in it, there are certain Biblical guidelines which can help amazingly well. I have a booklet called "Resolving Conflict God's way" which I have found tremendously helpful. Let me know if you need it. We might even be able to arrange that a seminar of Biblical peace-making be held here, if there are enough people wanting to learn.

Paul gives another strategy that comes just after today's reading, which provides an alternative focus to our thinking. Just have a quick look at v8, if you have the Bible open in front of you. He doesn't just say, "Don't be anxious," he gives our thoughts a shove in the right direction. Take a look, because I can't go into it for lack of time right now. These thought patterns that Paul talks about, will lead you to a life of moral and spiritual excellence as well as peace.

You might be thinking, "You don't realise just how bad this anxiety thing is." Friend, if you are serious about getting the monkey off your back, you need to follow the manufacturer's instructions before you give up. Read the manufacturer's handbook, the Bible. It may not be as simple as praise the Lord and the gremlins flee but victory is there waiting for you... If it is a long-standing issue, you may need a three-pronged attack. Dealing with forgiveness issues, adopting reconciliation strategies and simple obedience to God's instructions of praise, thankfulness and asking him for help. (Phil 4:6)

These, combined with the humility that asks for help, will get you far more peace than stroking the anxiety or trying to tame the beast it has become...

"The peace that passes understanding" ... that's what we want. And when it comes, we realise that it is a slice of heaven brought to earth. A truly remarkable, supernatural event, because when that heavenly peace comes, there is no way we should be feeling as good as this under the circumstances. We are not interested in peace which is like some sort of spiritual marshmallow, that is soft and sweet and goeey, which will melt away when the heat comes on.

The peace God gives is robust and continues even through the storms of life. We anticipate it will be ours even when "men's hearts fail them for fear" in the last days, before the Lord comes in glory with his heavenly angels.

Let's keep practicing these principles, so that when the real hard tests come, we will not be found wanting and having done all, we will stand.