

Sermon preached by Rev. Peter O'Brien at the Healing Service at St. Andrew's Cathedral, Sydney on Wednesday 20th December 2006. Reading: Phil 2:5-11,19-30

Topic: "In The Steps of the Master"

INTRODUCTION—WHAT DID JESUS DO?

Philippians 2—a passage that speaks to us about Christmas. But it also speaks to us about Easter. The two together. Not many passages in the NT.

Tells us about Jesus' coming, and that he died on a cross. God exalted him to the place of honour. Jesus as the perfect model. What He did for us cannot be repeated. We cannot die for sins, save men and women. Why we can't even save ourselves. But He is a model for us in our relationships with one another. We are to have the same attitude of mind that he had (v. 6).

1. EXAMPLE NO. 1—TIMOTHY (VV. 19-24)

The colleague closest to Paul's heart. The apostle often sent him as a messenger to churches. Here in Philippians 2:20, Paul says he has no one like him whom he can send to the church at Philippi. There is no one with such a kindred spirit to Paul as Timothy. Why?

1. A genuine concern for the well-being of the people

Timothy was known for his active care for the Philippians. I don't know how long it was since he had seen them, but he was genuine and sincere in his concern for them.

2. A proven commitment to the gospel

His proven character seen in his ongoing commitment to the gospel with Paul. Timothy was a tested and tried person. He is one who has been through the mill. He has worked alongside Paul and the apostle had ample opportunity to see how he stacked up under pressure. The apostolic lifestyle was no easy task. Often on the move, no real security. Apt to get thrown into prison if there had been religious or economic opposition from Jews or Gentiles to the work one was involved in. Timothy has been tried in a variety of ways, including persecution (cf. 1:30), and he has stood the test.

3. Seeking the things of Christ

Others Paul tells us looked out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. Paul is not speaking about unbelievers. He is talking about other Christians. Taken up with their own cares and concerns. Put themselves first. But not Timothy.

Presented to the believers at Philippi as one who followed the model of the Lord Jesus.

2. EXAMPLE NO. 2—EPAPHRODITUS (VV. 25-30)

Paul writes with great tenderness and warmth of his friend and colleague from Philippi. He writes to the Philippians to inform them of what has happened to their fellow-Christian and to explain why Paul is sending him back home with the letter.

He also writes to give them another striking example of the self-sacrificing service that is demanded of all Christians. He wants to show a further model of the way the Philippians should imitate Christ.

1. *He faced death on account of the work of Christ*

Epaphroditus in his travels for the congregation had fallen sick. His friends at Philippi had heard about it but they did not know just how serious his illness was. To say that he was ill is to understate the matter. Paul tells them that it had nearly proven fatal.

The apostle also wants to show them that Epaphroditus was a godly model for the Philippians to follow. The pattern of Christian servanthood is repeated here. Just as Christ died as a servant and Paul faced death, so Epaphroditus had come near to death because of his serving the congregation. It was on account of the work of Christ (v. 30).

Like Timothy this is the same work of the gospel. He was involved in Christian ministry. Epaphroditus was a model of unselfish service. He had expended himself in the service of Christ and like his master had come 'up to death'. The echo is deliberate. He had not actually died, but through his severe illness he had gone within a whisker of death.

2. *Why was his life spared?*

We are not told it was because of Paul's prayers. You and I would expect that Paul prayed for his friend. But this is not mentioned. Nor is anything said about the prayers of the congregation. In fact, they did not even know how seriously ill Epaphroditus was. They knew he was sick (perhaps they thought he was a bit off colour, as we would say), they might have prayed, but the text of the New Testament does not tell us this. Nor does the letter say that the reason for his life's being spared was because of the Philippians' great faith. They certainly were believers, and some may well have had great faith. But Paul does not mention this.

There is only one reason given: *God's mercy*. The Lord in his kindness chose to spare Epaphroditus. We often say, perhaps about a relative or Christian friend: 'Well, it is a mercy that he or she was taken'. This is true if the person who dies is a believer in the Lord Jesus. We think it is a mercy if they go, perhaps this is best, especially if they have been through a long, drawn out illness. Or the pressure on other family members caring for the one who is seriously ill has almost reached breaking point. We might be right to say it is a mercy.

But here Paul says that God had mercy on Epaphroditus by sparing him from death. Why? Was it so that he could carry on his wonderful work? Perhaps so. [God has mercy because he has mercy.]

3. *Responding to God's intervention*

But surprisingly, the apostle says, 'But God had mercy on him, and not on him only *but also on me*, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow' (v. 27).

Paul said a chapter earlier in Philippians, 'For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. I desire to depart and to be with Christ' (1:21, 23). That was his great ambition. But Epaphroditus is spared, and the apostle can say that God showed mercy on him, Paul, so that he would not have sorrow added to sorrow. This friend was very precious to him. He would have felt the loss terribly. It would have been one massive burden upon another. And God in his kindness spared Epaphroditus, and Paul was grateful for his mercy.

You see even Paul who wanted to depart this life and be with Christ was prepared to stay for the sake of his friends: 'it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body' (v. 24).

The Lord knows best. He does all things well. Should we pray? Certainly. Is it a mercy if some Christian is taken to be with the Lord? Yes, certainly. Is it a mercy if another person is kept alive? Paul says, 'Yes', because the Lord showed mercy to Epaphroditus and to Paul himself.

Five and a half years ago, when I had bowel cancer, I did not know what the outcome would be. I received wonderful medical treatment at RPA Hospital: radiotherapy, chemotherapy, surgery and chemotherapy again. The specialists there saved my life. My family and Christian friends prayed and visited, and encouraged. The Lord had mercy on me. But he also took Bruce Smith, a colleague on the faculty at Moore and visiting lecturer. He had mercy on Bruce and took him into his glorious presence for ever.

3. ARE THEY EXAMPLES FOR US?

Yes, they are in different ways. Both followed the wonderful model of the Lord Jesus Christ. What he did for us. Let's follow in his steps.