

## 26A SFX 2023

We are reading what is perhaps my favourite of St Paul's letters, his letter to the Philippians. It is not the most theologically profound – that is his letter to the Romans, his most passionate – that might be Galatians – or most interesting of what it reveals of the first Christian communities – that would be Corinthians. It is simply because it is so full of joy. This was a community Paul knew and nurtured. A community that didn't seem to give him problems. He could say to them: *"You are my joy and my crown."* *"You have a permanent place in my heart and God knows how much I miss you all."*

Although it is a short letter he uses the word 'joy' or 'rejoice' occur fifteen times. But it is not a superficial joy – and I find this very moving - because Paul tells them about his chains. What exactly this means we cannot be sure, but he probably writes from a prison in Ephesus. Paul may have been chained to a soldier, or to the wall of his cell or he may have been forced to wear handcuffs or leg-irons. But Paul's spirit could not be chained.

Take courage, he writes, take heart. Remember the tenderness, you have for each other, the sympathy. Paul's frustrations are simply overwhelmed by the joy of the Gospel of which he speaks again and again and again. *"Rejoice in the Lord, always, again I say, rejoice."* *"I want you to be happy, always happy in the Lord; I repeat I want you to be happy."* Anyone who thinks St Paul is miserable, read Philippians.

And he seems to think that the happiness of this small community will spring from their remembering **what they have in common: their life in Christ**. Today he invites us to put on the mind of Christ, the servant Christ, expressed in that beautiful hymn. He asks us to be united in our convictions, united in our love with a common purpose and a common mind.

Now we know that this easier said than done. Look around at our world, our society, our politics. It is contentious, fractured, argumentative. Is there anything that we can agree on? Everyone is shouting at each other, warring with each other. And what of the church? There have always been divisions, difficulties. And for anyone who ventures onto the internet you can find a lot of nastiness and hate. I have to say it is not something I have experienced in this parish. I am sure there is a range of opinions amongst you, but I have not found bitterness or argument or division, thanks be to God. I would like to think that even if we differ and disagree we do so with love because we are seeking to do the will of Christ, each and every day trying to put on the mind of Christ – live his precepts, live his values.

But this week is important for the church? Why? Because in Rome a special synod begins. It has a strange title – a *Synod on Synodality*. It is a meeting about how we as a church have a conversation together, hold different ideas together without shouting or quarrelling.

St Paul talks about 'the Spirit we have in common.' The Second Vatican Council had such an experience of that Spirit, of unity and love that it came to describe the Church as the **pilgrim people of God** walking together through history. Pope Paul VI set up the Synod as a way of taking that experience and conversation forward. He noted that the word "**Synod**" comes from two Greek words *syn*, **meaning** 'together', and *hodos*, **meaning** 'road or way.' So it is about us journeying together, walking together as a church. In fact, in the early Church St John Chrysostom said that for him 'Church' and 'synod' are the same thing, because the

Church is all about walking together.

Pope Francis' vision is for a Synodal Church, 'a listening church' that is "synodal" at every level, with everyone listening to each other, learning from each other and taking responsibility for proclaiming the Gospel.

Pope Francis has expanded the Synod to hear not only the voices of Bishops, but the clergy, religious and laity following St John Henry Newman's talk of consulting the faithful to get a complete sense of the faith of the church - what is called the *sensus fidelium* in Latin. The synod reached even our own parish in a process of consultation in preparation. It will end after the second session next year.

'Synods' and 'Synodality' might be new words for some people. The idea is well expressed in the Eastern Churches. You could say it was a fruit of the work of Pope John Paul who asked the other churches to reimagine the ministry of the Pope. The head of the Orthodox Church suggested that for the churches of East and West to heal their divisions it is essential that the ministry of the Pope be balanced by a rediscovery of synodality in the West.

Some are anxious about the synod. Some people are readily welcoming it. The synod is not a parliament, it is an act of collective discernment. It is consultative, so the Pope makes the ultimate decisions. It is not meant to generate heat or controversy. There are important issues facing the church and our societies. Some are contentious. We can shout at each other, or we can listen together, and discern the way forward in the light of the Gospels, walk together in conversation as the Pilgrim People of God.

It is not about right or left, radical or traditional, progressive or conservative. It is about listening to each other and allowing the Spirit of Truth that the Lord promised at the last supper, to guide us and direct faithfully in our own changing times.

Perhaps the greatest document of Vatican II was *Dei Verbum* on Divine Revelation because it put the church in listening mode. We try to discern the will of God with an ear to his Word. But with the other ear we listen to each other, try to discern the signs of the times.

So let us pray for Pope Francis and the Synod that they may truly discern the will of God for our times, and remain, like St Paul's beloved Philippians, joyfully united with a common purpose and a common mind, to be a listening community of love, generosity, tenderness and sympathy.