

26 July 2020, 11am
*Christ Church New
Southgate & Friern Barnet*

Sermon: The joy of tilapia fish
Philippians 4.14-23
Rev. Ruth Moriarty

I'd like to tell you about a woman called Irene Jones from Woolwich Central Baptist. She has passed away now but when this happened, she was about 85 years old. We started to have shared lunches at the manse. Every time without fail Irene would prepare some fish for the feast. Now when I say fish, I mean, 20 whole tilapia fish, beautifully prepared, cooked and absolutely delicious. Irene was not a rich woman, she was old and lived alone, she had progressive cancer, she couldn't see well but boy could she cook fish. In fact, I say there were 20 fish, I don't really know because as soon as the lid was off they were gone in a flash.

The church at Philippi gave to Paul in a similarly sacrificial way. They supported him financially again and again and again. And they were the only ones that did. It might seem strange to us that no-one else was supporting a man who wrote half the new testament, but maybe at the time in those early days of the church to support a pioneer was risky. A man who had not long been a persecutor of Christians, a man who roamed from place to place preaching and trying to set up churches and had wound up in prison in Rome.

In this final part of the letter to the Philippian church there is also another man, a man who grew up in a backwater town, who had a simple job, who got into trouble with all the authorities, who annoyed every official religious person in town, who offended the temple turning tables and ended up sentenced to death, abandoned and alone.

Each of us know what it is to feel alone, especially now. Living alone, working alone, worshipping alone. This era has reduced our connections with each other, and made our world feel smaller. In this deserted feeling and reality, we find good company with Paul – no one else was helping him apart from the Philippi church. We find good company too with Christ – for as he walked a path of humility and suffering alone, there were a small group of women attended to him in prayer and seeking his presence.

Irene Jones never attended a shared meal at Woolwich, in fact I don't know how she even got the fish to the manse, but her generosity was felt and enjoyed by everyone. Her gift, the most abundant on the table, reflected her faith, and her receipt of generosity from the church in other ways. Her tilapia fish were the overflow of her heart and soul. For the generosity of Christ is echoed in her gift. At the time Woolwich central was not a large church, and the shared lunches were not attended by many but she supported it in the most Christian of manners – her costly gift reflects

God's gift to us his son. It is these kinds of gifts that Paul says are sweet-smelling. Sweet smelling gifts come from the heart, they are gifts that bless and encourage early programmes, pioneers like Paul.

Across the Old Testament we see primitive religion where offerings are made – normally an animal killed and burnt on an altar as a gift to God. The idea is that the smell would rise like the smoke does towards God in heaven above. It is sweet as the poor animal was costly to give away to God and not to feed a family instead. Check out Genesis 8.21, Exodus 29.18, Leviticus 1.9 and Ezekiel 20.41 if you'd like to find out more about this practice of offering.

Paul reminds the church that their gift is not only good to him, not only good for the spread of the church as part of the partnership in the gospel. Gifts like this have eternal significance when he says in v 20: to God be the glory forever and ever.

In these days where so many of us are alone, stuck home alone, trapped in houses with grumpy family members, out of rhythm and out of touch with our normal life, might we consider how we can give to others? How can we be generous with our time? How can we be generous in prayer? In encouraging others by writing/calling/emailing/meeting up for socially distanced walks?

As the Philippi church gave to Paul, and gave and gave again, he reminds them of the God who is abundantly

wealthy in Christ, who gave all he had, everything for us. The son of God who gave up life in heaven to come to earth, to walk in ordinary homes and poverty, to teach us, to heal us, to love us.

As Christ died he saw no-one, separated from God's very presence. The women at a distance from the cross could do nothing but pray and weep. They found themselves without power, without choice and scared. And yet their gift to him, to anoint his body with spices, was one of eternal significance. For in their gift to him, their searching – they meet the risen Christ in glorious light, they receive the good news that Jesus is alive and that God is glorious indeed. So with joy and trembling they run to tell of God's gift to us.

The entire book of Philippians is about joy – joy to know Christ, joy to serve him and joy to care for others. May we seek to have the same mind as Christ for it is a joyful thing indeed to know him. May our joy too be found in our gifts to others, for Christ has given everything to us, and delights in gifts we share with others.

For every bucket of tilapia fish, God is delighted for these gifts that are sacrificial, that build the church, that share the gospel in small ways are mighty and sweet-smelling in his sight. May we joyfully give to others – and he will supply our needs to his glory and grace.