

WORKING OUT OUR NEW IDENTITY

READ Phil 2. 12-18

Paul is laying the foundations here to a future he doubts he will see. If the builders keep working to the design he has shown them then it will be a thing of beauty in a world of ugliness. A beacon of hope.

ASK Read and spend some time on verse 15 'you are to shine like lights in the world, in the middle of a twisted and depraved generation.' How are you and the church shining in this world?

In verse 15 Paul is quoting a passage from Daniel 12.3: *Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever.* This passage speaks of the 'wise', Israelites skilled in knowing God's law. They are therefore shining in a time of persecution to the Babylonian world around them.

ASK How do you feel different to the world around you? Do you encounter persecution?

Paul continues beyond the here and now to the 'Day of the Messiah' the day when God will bring the whole cosmos to justice and peace and likewise Daniel then connects the salvation in the here and now to the day when the dead will be raised. Dan 12. 12-13: Blessed is the one who waits for and reaches the end...You will rest, and then at the end of the days you will rise to receive your allotted inheritance."

Tom Wright writes: *'You are to be a sign of God's new life in a world that only knows the way to death.'*

Phil 2:12 is often misunderstood. It can be read as though Christian's are responsible for doing things which will earn them salvation. 'The lord helps those who help themselves'. This idea does not come from the Bible, and is out of line with the rest of Paul's writings. Salvation, as he stresses in verses 13, is God's work from start to finish. Paul wants the Philippians to work out for themselves what 'being saved' means in practice. Paul won't be there to walk them through life, he is laying the foundation but is excited about what a community working through their salvation will be like in the future. A cause for celebration rather than grumbling.

Reflection on Identity:

Anthony de Mello, the Jesuit contemplative, tells a story about a woman who was in an accident and found herself in heaven, facing a great light. Suddenly she heard a great, booming voice ask, "Who are you?" She gave her name. The voice answered, 'I didn't ask your name, I asked who you are.' She said, 'I'm a school teacher.' The voice answered, 'I didn't ask for your profession, I asked who you are.' She said, 'I'm the wife of the mayor.' The voice answered, 'I didn't ask whose wife you are, I asked who you are.' She said, 'I'm the mother of four children.' The voice answered, 'I didn't ask who mother you are, I asked who you are.' By this point the woman was finding herself rather confused. But the voice asked again, 'who are you?' She said 'I'm a Christian.' The voice answered, 'I didn't ask for your religion, I asked who you are.' She said, 'I'm the one who prays regularly, who goes to church, and reads the Bible.' The voice answered, 'I didn't ask for your religious practices, I asked who you are.' She said, 'I'm the one who gives to charity, the one who helps the poor and needy.' The voice answered, 'I didn't ask about your charitable giving, I asked who you are.' It was then the medics revived her. The story ends with her leaving her hospital, determined to spend the rest of her life finding out who she really was.

(Story taken from Opening our Lives by Trystan Owain Hughes p91)

Think about how you might answer that question - 'Who are you?' It's an important question as how you see yourself defines how we view others, how we treat others and what it might mean for us to shine in this world. It is easy to define ourselves on outward factors - successes, appearance, achievements but as Christians we are challenged to look beyond this. Who are you and what makes you shine?