

A) Introduction:

[Mona Lisa](#) by [Leonardo da Vinci](#) has long attracted vandals and is currently one of the best-protected artworks. In 1956, the lower part of the painting was severely damaged when a vandal doused the painting with acid while it was on display at a museum in Montauban, France.^[4] On December 30 of the same year, a young Bolivian threw a rock at the painting; this resulted in the loss of a speck of pigment near the left elbow, which was later painted over.^[5] The use of [bulletproof glass](#) has shielded the Mona Lisa from more recent attacks. The Mona Lisa is just one amongst many works of art that have suffered from vandalism and that need protecting.

The purpose of this illustration is to say that some of the most beautiful objects we can find are amongst the most fragile and so need protection.

Summary:

Chapter 1: theme = the church under threat from opposition and persecution. How this is being played out in Paul's life and how the church should respond.

Chapter 3: theme = the church under threat from false teachers, the issue of righteousness.

Chapter 2: theme = the church under threat from what I would call relationship problems, internal difficulties due to personality clashes, or behaving badly towards one another.

Return to ch1 v27 – read.

Chapter 2 = an outworking of this exhortation, with particular reference to how we conduct ourselves as a community living under the headship of Christ.

Going back to my illustration of beauty and fragility:

Ch2v1 Paul portrays something of the beauty of knowing Christ as a body of his people.

Re-read Ch2v1: knowing Christ and knowing his people, or knowing Christ through knowing his people brings wonderful or beautiful benefits: a sense of encouragement and comfort, a sense of fellowship or fulfilling friendships, expressions of compassion and practical love ... and we could go on...

However, Paul goes on to stress that these things and in particular our unity, need to be protected and worked at. They should not be taken for granted or neglected, for there are potential enemies waiting to jump out of the dark recesses of our hearts.

The church is beautiful, but its beauty is fragile, and in this chapter Paul identifies a number of mentalities or attitudes that can potentially pose a threat to the church and cause great harm.

Ch2vv2-3 – re-read.

Ch2v14 – re-read.

Summary = selfish ambition, vain conceit, looking to our own interests, complaining and arguing.

I work in French most of the time and was familiar with the French translation which rather than selfish ambition uses the word rivalry – which in my opinion captures Paul's thought

perhaps better. Indeed the RV translates the word – factions – the idea that there are competing groups within the church each jostling for pre-eminence or seeking to impose their ways of doing things. The greek dictionary I consulted suggests that Paul pulled this word from the world of politics where it denotes a self-seeking and partisan pursuit of power by unfair means.

I think we probably would all concede that the world of politics can be a pretty ugly and ruthless place. And what Paul is saying is that the low arts of political advancement and intrigue should not be found in churches.

Paul uses the same word in Ch1v17 where he says that some, not in Philippi but elsewhere it seems, preach the gospel for these selfish reasons. Furthermore, in Ch4v2 (sorry about the spoiler) Paul exhorts two women, Euodia and Synthyche to get on. Were these women rivals and were factions beginning to gather around them. It was quite possibly the case. Rivalries and factions were sadly present in the early church and have tragically dogged the history of the church to this day.

The other thing Paul mentions was complaining or grumbling, which is often accompanied by unfair or unconstructive criticism. These attitudes too can poison church life, damaging relationships and community.

At MRC we are in a time of transition, a challenging period with involvement in two new church plants, and changes in leadership and all sorts of things.

I want to suggest that it is in such demanding times of transition that some of the difficulties that Paul mentions are more likely to surface. Personally I haven't seen them surface, but I am not really at the centre of things so might not be best placed. It does strike me though that these major projects and changes are going ahead with a very good degree of unity and harmony and solidarity. Nevertheless, reading this chapter this morning should just call us to be vigilant to potential dangers.

But that's enough of the dangers...

B) How does Paul counter or remedy these threats, realities?

He wants to protect unity and depth, quality of fellowship and relationships by promoting selfless humble service, or attitude that the good of the church community as a whole is more important than our personal interests ... he does so primarily through pointing us to ...

- 1) The example of Jesus Christ. Paul wants us to have the same mind set or mentality or approach to life as Jesus.

Ch2vv 6-11 – probably an early Christian hymn that Paul has inserted – a hymn with very developed and profound theology – hymn defends Christ's divinity and his authentic humanity, promotes also his exaltation and future glorious return – these things could be examined in depth but Paul uses hymn essentially as a call to humble selfless service, even suffering service – that's what we'll concentrate on.

God the Father and God the Son – not rivals competing against each other to see who was best/ personal glory, but working together, harmoniously to a common end (end not explicit but salvation, reconciliation, new people, new creation ...). The very idea of the

Father and Son arguing over who would or would not become incarnate is preposterous, inconceivable.

To achieve that end Jesus voluntarily gave up or relinquished aspects of status, position, and rights. He left the heavenly realms to come to this miserable cruel world. He accepted certain limits upon his divinity in order to become an authentic man with all his limitations.

We live in a very rights orientated society – very me first. God the Son had rights but he refused to invoke them. He could, for example, have called upon an army of angels to rescue him from the cross, but he didn't because he had a higher purpose in view.

To achieve that end Jesus put the interests of people/humanity first – he understood others, he respected others, he served others he loved others. This wasn't always convenient; it placed huge demands and stresses upon his energies and his time.

The act of serving involved relinquishing hold upon comfort, ease, ambitions ... it also involved accepting suffering, even ultimately death, and one of the most humiliating and brutal deaths that one could endure - crucifixion.

Just re-read a gospel in the light of this hymn quoted by Paul – and think through afresh some of these themes – Christ's self-denial, the sacrifices he made, the suffering he endured – and his motivation – the common good, the salvation of men and women.

In the hymn – the downward trajectory towards death does bottom out and becomes an upward trajectory – resurrection, exaltation and universal acknowledgement.

Cf Hebrews 12v2 (read)

Application to Philippi / us.

Paul wants us to protect and enhance the beauty of the church – and he points us to Jesus as an example to inspire and to imitate – but what exactly are we to take from Jesus' example?

Church life, amongst other things, is about humble service – serving the body as a whole or serving individuals within that body.

Humble service will inevitably involve a degree of giving up other things, it will place demands on our time and energy, it will sometimes be inconvenient, sometimes uncomfortable, and at times opposition or suffering will be encountered.

- If we find ourselves competing with others to be the best, to appear the most visible or most influential, then it is time to take a long hard look at ourselves and an even longer look at Jesus.
- If we find ourselves serving but grumbling or complaining about it, feeling resentful or bitter, then again we need to ask ourselves why we are serving and take a long hard look at Jesus.
- It is true that the demands of service and the pain of suffering can lead to weariness and de-motivation and lots of other negative feelings attitudes – so we need to reflect not only on the first half of the hymn but also the second where we read of Christ's resurrections and exaltation. Paul includes it deliberately, surely.

- Part of Jesus mentality, that we are to imitate, is surely that service and suffering is worthwhile (i) Because serving the church in humble love is of great worth and benefit in and of itself, it contributes to enhancing the glory of God's most treasured or cherished project, (ii) because our humble, selfless service will be followed by resurrection and eternal life. It is possible to serve and to suffer now because we know, have a sure and certain hope that what will follow will be better beyond comparison.

2) How do we make progress?

Paul sets the standard high – saying we should be like Jesus is asking a lot – you might say it is asking too much, you might be asking yourselves how am I going to get anywhere near achieving that? It's impossible! It's way beyond what I can do!

Re-read ch2vv12-13

What's this about working out our salvation with fear and trembling? Are we really supposed to be afraid of God? And then if we are to work, what is this about God working in us? Is Paul getting confused?

I think that the fear and trembling issue, in the context, may be more to do with the question – what will the church, our church be like, if we fall dramatically short of taking Paul's advice to follow Jesus' example? What would church be like if nobody cared for anyone else? What would church be like if we were divided into competing factions? What would church be like if moaning and complaining and arguing and criticising dominated our conversations after the service?

I have experienced a church that has gone down this road – and I probably still bear the scars, and I can tell you that I tremble at the idea of ever going there again – and pray that in God's grace that I would never be responsible for taking a church down that track.

Some commentators, particularly Ralph Martin, in his commentary on Philippians, suggests that the "working out of salvation" does not refer to individual salvation, but to the collective local church community, its integrity and solidity, its beauty and worth. It's not all about me and my salvation, but rather about working together to make sure that we're all making progress and persevering and being faithful – together. Any church that doesn't take Paul's teaching seriously is unlikely to endure for very long.

Going back to idea of beauty and fragility – imagine you are a cleaner in a big country house – say Blenheim Palace. Say you had to clean and dust all the fine pottery, really valuable antiques – I think you would probably approach the task with a sense of dread or apprehension, perhaps fear and trembling – you don't want to break anything, you hardly dare touch anything! And so you would take the task seriously and take great care and precaution to follow any instructions you are given.

A similar fear of bringing the church into disrepute, of marring the joys of fellowship, of spoiling relationships, should lead us to take great care about how we conduct ourselves and to take seriously Paul's exhortation to think like Jesus and behave like Jesus.

But all this can still lead to a daunting sense of burden and responsibility and the question remains – how? How can we achieve this? How can we make progress?

Which is why Paul complements an exhortation to take things seriously, with the reminder that when and as we do so God is at work in us, accomplishing his purposes. His purpose is, amongst other things, to create new people and new communities that are growing in Christ likeness.

Ch2v13 should change, I hope, any lingering sense of pessimism into a sense of optimism, hope and confidence. God is at work in his church – his is at work in you, in us and he is a God in the business of making what appears impossible, possible. You may feel weak and fallible but if God is at work in you, then he will accomplish that which you could never accomplish alone, if God is at work in you he will help you grow into the kind of person he wants you to be. Perhaps you think, “I can never be like that” that’s a realistic thought if we leave God out of the equation, but God is in the equation, he is at work and for that reason we can have confidence then when we take his Word seriously he will help us to grow in Christ likeness.

I sometimes compare God’s work in a church to that of an architect or builder renovating a house. If houses had feelings I don’t think they would enjoy the process of renovation but houses are renovated to make them even better than before – more functional, more attractive. Maybe, with all the changes going on at MRC at present, you feel a bit like we are being renovated – it’s tough – but let’s remember that God is at work and that his purposes are good and that the purpose of his work amongst us is to make us an even better local church, and even better new community of God’s people. As we take God seriously, he will achieve much in us, through us and around us.

3) The Church’s role in the wider world.

Paul wants us to imitate Christ so that we might become an ever more beautiful local expression of God’s new people.

But in Ch2vv14-16 he points us to the wider issue of the church’s role in the wider world.

He uses the illustration or metaphor of the sky at night. He wants local churches to be like stars. Stars can be seen because they are different from the space around them. Stars can be seen because they give out light, where as the space around them does not.

The basic lesson is that Paul wants local churches to be different from the society or culture in which they are placed, and he wants local churches to be visible in the places where they exist.

How are we to be different? Paul exhorts us to be pure and blameless and he calls us “children of God”. The use or sense here is probably that just as in children we see something of the personalities of their parents, so as Christians; people should see something of the character of God in us.

When we practice humble, loving service, without complaining or criticising, without factions and rivalries, then we will be different and it will be noticed – we will be like stars in the night sky.

To push the boundaries of Paul’s astronomical illustration – we want churches to be stars that shine forth the light of Christ and not black holes from which the light of Christ cannot escape.

4) The rest of the chapter.

I will finish shortly – which may come as a relief if you were fearing I was going to talk about the remainder of chapter 2 in the same detail as the first 16 verses – I am not – I was entrusted with a very large chunk of this letter, and passages which indeed would be worth going into somewhat more depth than I have been able to do.

But very briefly – in the remainder of Ch2 Paul basically recommends two of his fellow workers to the church in Philippi, one, Epaphroditus, has actually been sent by the church in an errand to help Paul.

All I want to say is that Paul holds up both Timothy and Epaphroditus as examples of believers who have put into practice the teaching contained in the first half of this chapter. Maybe later on today you would like to re-read the verse 19 to 29 and think about in what way Timothy and Epaphroditus were examples of Christ like servants, and you can ask yourselves what you can learn from them.