

Reflection for 23/06/20

From Reader Margaret Enger

St. Paul in lockdown part 2: What did he do?

Paul was in lockdown more than once. The longest time was when he was under house arrest in Rome. His life was threatened in Jerusalem and he was transferred to Caesarea. He was kept there for over two years and then he appealed to Caesar. This was his right as a Roman citizen, and he knew he would not get a fair trial if he was transferred back to Jerusalem. He was sent to Rome and kept there under house arrest for a long time while awaiting trial. He could not go out to preach or visit the Christians in the city. He was in his own place, but under guard. But he had many visitors. During a later imprisonment in Rome, all but Dr. Luke left him.

His sight was poor so he could not write long letters for himself. He had to employ a scribe and dictate them to him. But he did not give up, or give in to despair. He kept praying for the churches he had founded and the people he knew. And he kept on writing letters, some of which form part of our New Testament. In the letter to the Ephesians, from that later imprisonment, he even describes himself as “an ambassador in chains”

One of the most loved of all his letters, that to the Philippians, was written in this first time of house arrest (lockdown) and in the final greeting, where he includes greetings from those who are with him. He refers to “those who are of Caesar’s household”. He could not go to them, but they had come to him. How much more blest we have been, we who have access to the internet, to be able to maintain contact with our friends and families and our church, in ways Paul could not have dreamed of. And those who have no internet access have telephones.

In his letter to the Colossians he refers to another Christian as “my fellow prisoner”, one named Aristarchus, and includes him in the final greeting. He also refers to another letter that has not survived, a letter to the church in Laodicea. He tells the Colossians to swap letters with that church so that both churches can read both letters. No cc on the computer in those days! You had to physically hand over your letter and take theirs. In the final words that he writes himself he says “remember my chains”. We are not in chains but many of our fellow Christians are. Remember them, and be thankful that even in lockdown or shielding you are free.

At the end of his second letter to Timothy he refers to a trial when no-one stood up for him. He does not hold that against those who deserted him but says “the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion’s mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever.”

Yesterday we began and ended on a note of praise. As we continue to count our own blessings in lockdown let us do the same today, remembering Paul's words from that same letter to the Philippians

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again. Rejoice! The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God that passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

"Praise to the holiest in the height,
and in the depth be praise;
in all His words most wonderful,
most sure in all His ways."

J.H.Newnan 1801-1890