

Philippians in Ten

Week Two: Paul Remaps Power Structures

Readings:

Phil 1: 27-30, Phil 3: 20-21, Phil 3:6-11

Recap

Philippi was a Roman colony in north west Greece. The city had become a Roman colony a couple of hundred years before Paul first arrived and Rome had settled army veterans there, with the result, that in the mid-1st century, Romans owned most of the land and dominated the local institutions, although the majority of the population were Greeks or native Thracians.

The city was now a political and economic centre of some importance in the Roman Empire. It was dominated by Roman gods and religions and the most prominent of these was the imperial cult. There were monuments, temples and priests dedicated to Caesar, and everyone was expected to venerate the Emperor.

The imperial cult was the fastest growing religion in the world at this time and was enmeshed in the fabric of society. And the gospel or good news about the emperor was that he brought peace and justice to the peoples of the empire – so said the propaganda.

The reality of the political and military might of Rome was everywhere as the Philippians walked through their town – inscriptions, epitaphs, architecture, statues and temples all extolled the virtue of Rome & its rulers. Philippi was a little Rome.

Not honouring the gods, not bowing down to Lord Caesar, was the cause of trouble with the Christians' neighbours, causing financial and relational difficulties; and it likely caused occasional judicial problems from the civil authorities

Chapter 3:21, Paul says that the Philippians are to live primarily as citizens of heaven and (1: 27) they are to live out their citizenship in a manner worthy of the good news of Christ. Paul here is deliberately making a play on their citizenship of Rome, as part of a Roman colony. They may be citizens of Rome, subject to the lord and saviour, Caesar, who has his own counterfeit good news – but, more importantly, and ultimately, they are citizens of heaven, subject to the Lord, Jesus Christ.

In all this, Paul is remapping the universe for the Philippians. He is getting them to lift their eyes to see a more fundamental reality than that of the Roman colony in which they live.

Paul sees a different reality. He sees a universe ruled by King Jesus, to whom every knee, including the Emperor's, will bow; a universe where greatness is gained by humility and service, as opposed to grasping for position and the use of violent force; a universe where it's possible to live with joy without anxiety or grumbling or dissension.

Questions to Consider

How did the Roman empire get its message of its pretensions to power across to the people of Philippi? What means did it use to spread its propaganda about peace, security and the gracious benevolence of the Emperor?

What “empires” do we contend with today that seek our allegiance? How do they seek to influence us – what ought we to be aware of?

What verses can you find in the letter that stand in opposition to:

- the cult of Caesar
- status and hierarchy
- self-promotion and grasping for position?

What for Paul is the challenge to Caesar’s dehumanising power and authority (and that of all earthly empires, despots and powers)?

In all of this Paul challenges our allegiance. Can you see examples in today’s world where Christians have mixed their faith with political outlooks and political leaders in unhelpful ways?

What do you think Paul would want to say to any of us tempted to go in that direction?

In the talk’s conclusion, Gary said. “Our political systems are generally bound up in economic growth, consumerism and defence of what we have, and we need to be very careful that our allegiance is to the bigger picture of Christ’s kingdom of peace, love, sharing and generosity.” How do we ensure we do that?