Back in the nineteen eighties there was an American TV series called the A-Team. It was much loved by our two sons. It involved four ex-army men who were on the run because of former misdemeanours or misunderstandings. Despite the authorities looking for them they had time to support the down-trodden and the exploited; righting wrongs; and supporting the poor and oppressed. Each episode had a fair quota of vehicle chases, guns firing, and bombs going off – but no one ever seemed to be injured, let alone killed.

Hannabal, the leader of the group, after all the mayhem, signed off each episode with the thought, “I love it, when a plan comes together.” As it was a phrase on people’s lips at the time, I once used it as the text of a sermon on a Maundy Thursday.

The phrase came to mind as I read today’s first reading in preparation for this sermon. It is about Paul’s desire that the Christians of Philippi should come together. That they should be united in Spirit and worship. That they should recognise that they are one in Christ and put away their differences – these are apparent in other parts of the letter. The congregation there was comprised of former Jews in the diaspora and Gentile Christians from the Hellenistic world. He uses the example of Jesus’ role as an exemplar of how they should be as the people of the embryonic church in Philippi.

In the middle of the passage we read today about the need for unity and harmony, Paul places what we know of as ‘the Philippian Hymn’. It is verses 6 to 11 in the English bible prose with which we are familiar. Earlier in the service we used it as a canticle in a poetic form. It is likely to be much more akin to how it would have been in the original Greek. It would have been used in something like this form in worship in the Early Church. The use of the word ‘hymn’ is something of a misnomer. It isn’t as we would use it to describe something sung. It is more like a very early creedal statement or the acclamations “Thou art worthy, O Lord our God …” and “Worthy is the Lamb, the Lamb that was slain …” in Revelation, chapters 4 and 5.

We know that Paul’s letter was written while he was in captivity, about thirty years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The original Greek of the Philippian Hymn differs in both vocabulary and grammar from that usually attributed to Paul. Most scholars think that it was a ‘hymn’ already in current use when Paul incorporated it into his letter. The ‘hymn’ must, therefore, have been in use within a couple of decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Stanza 1 is about the activity of Jesus, particularly his willingness to humble himself and be obedient, even to death. Stanza 2 is in glory to the Father, who recognised his sacrifice and obedience and raised Jesus to the heights. Paul uses the ‘hymn’ to help drive home his point about them being in unity and harmony. It speaks of at-one-ness in the Godhead. Says that Jesus did not snatch at position and status. It praises God in the selfless activity of Jesus.

We should be thrilled by being able to use today words created when the Christian faith was so new and vibrant despite the threats from external forces. We should be amazed at the depth of theological understanding which is apparent in such a short piece. We should be thankful in using it we are able to be connected with the church through the ages right back to the beginning. That connectedness also cements our relationship with the saints and faithful souls of so many throughout the intervening years.

They are words which speak of our faith as we continue to understand it. They are more than that – they give us realistic hope that things may be better in days to come. To return to the story of the A-Team; we are still in the phase when the mayhem is happening. Far from Covid-19 going away, the pandemic is still very much with us. Despite the self-sacrifice of so many, a few have made the situation worse by flaunting guidelines and acting recklessly. Things may get worse before they get better, but we go on hoping and praying that God-inspired research and understanding will enable scientists to find more effective treatments. A plan will come together that will, in the future, allow us to have more face to face contact safely. We also need to pray that politicians and world leaders take courageous decisions to safeguard our planet and work to stop further pandemics.

Will you do that as I pray the words of the ‘Philippian Hymn’ again. Graham will put the words up on the screen again. I will leave a space after each line for your quiet meditation of what the words mean for you, and for our world.

Stanza 1

1.    For the divine nature was his from the first;

2.    Yet he did not think to snatch at equality with God,

3.        but made himself nothing,

4.        assuming the nature of a slave.

5.    Bearing the human likeness,

6.    revealed in human shape,

7.        he humbled himself,

8.        and in obedience accepted even death

9.        – death on a cross.

Stanza 2

1.    Therefore God raised him to the heights

2.    and bestowed on him the name above all names,

3.        that at the name of Jesus

4.         every knee should bow –

5.         in heaven, on earth, and in the depths –

6.         and every tongue confess

7.         ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’,

8.    to the glory of God the Father.