

## 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

### Philippians 3:4b-14

#### *Knowing Christ Jesus*

Paul warns the Philippians against trusting in 'the flesh.' I wonder, what comes to mind when you hear the phrase, 'the flesh,' especially when spoken from the pulpit. Some rather juicy vices perhaps. But, sorry to disappoint you. Paul has in mind something more subtle.

Even the most unassuming among us, given the encouragement, will find something within ourselves about which we might boast. And so it was with Paul, 'If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more...' Put another way, 'if you've got achievements to brag about, I've got even more.' That gets closer to what Paul means, though not quite, because his focus is on a particular form of human confidence – that of heritage or descent.

Ancestry is something that we can take pride in. My maternal ancestors arrived in Petone in February 1842 and then moved down to Canterbury. Having spent some years in Christchurch, I learnt how important it was for some to be able to claim they descended from those who arrived on the first four ships, and I would chuckle (with some pride) that my forebears arrived before then. For Jews, their lineage, meant even more. A first century Jew would be able to trace their ancestry back a couple of thousand years to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and knew which of Jacob's twelve sons they were descended from. They were, understandably, proud of their lineage. But their natural pleasure at the thought of such a remarkable family history had become, from Paul's point of view, a dangerous boast. They now believed they were automatically superior to anyone who didn't share their lineage.

The early church was no different from the church of today. It contained distinct groups, each of which thought themselves somewhat better than the other. In the first century a significant division was between Jewish and Gentile Christians (that is, Christians of non-Jewish roots). The Jewish Christians were asserting this sense of superiority, insisting that all Christians should follow the Jewish customs and laws. Most significantly, they believed that all male Christians should be circumcised, believing that this would make them acceptable to God. Circumcision was the outward sign of being one of God's chosen people.

Paul was a Jewish Christian, but he found this attitude totally unacceptable. In earlier verses, he uses strong, even angry language, about those who insisted that all Christians should follow the Jewish law, calling them 'dogs,' the 'mutilation party,' 'evil workers.' Then he points out, that if anyone wants to claim a superior lineage, it's him. His ancestry was immaculate. Not only had he been circumcised, as all male Jews were, but he came from the best of the tribes: 'of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews...' He had been a trained Pharisee, the spiritual athletes of Judaism, and to top it off, he had been so zealous in his following of the Judaic law, that he had persecuted Christians. But then, he says, (drawing on a metaphor from accountancy) this credit balance counts for nothing. It's now a debit. All this human achievement, this trust in 'the flesh,' this reliance on his ancestry counts for nothing.

When it comes to our faith, what is it that we trust in? What do we have confidence in? For Paul, everything he had known before, everything he had inherited was, as he put, 'rubbish.' Now, he writes, 'I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.'

This is the crunch point. Paul had met the risen Christ, and that changed everything. He *knew* Christ Jesus. When Paul talks about 'knowing' Christ, he doesn't mean intellectual knowledge, but something deeply intimate. This isn't about facts or dogmas, but the personal experience of another person. It's

about a relationship and sharing Jesus' life. 'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.' All that matters to Paul is this relationship with Christ Jesus as his Lord. Next to this, everything else fades into insignificance.

This puts everything else we do – all our energies and efforts, longings, and desires – into perspective. What is our life about as Christians? It's about knowing Christ Jesus as our Lord. Paul helps us understand what this means.

It means knowing the power of Jesus' resurrection. For Paul, this isn't a past event, but an experience that operates in our lives today. First off, it's a guarantee that death isn't the final statement on human existence – a promise that after this life we'll be held in God's undying love – that death leads to a life that's far richer. However, knowing Christ doesn't mean that life suddenly becomes easier. If anything, it becomes more challenging. Paul talks about sharing in Christ's sufferings. That means different things for different people. There are people today who are facing persecution, torture, and even death because of knowing Christ. For others it's more hidden. Perhaps, it's about tough choices we have to make, priorities we choose as we seek to make Jesus the central focus of our lives.

It's easy to allow our relationship to Christ to become just one more ingredient in the swirling activities and commitments of life – just another area of interest among many. But Paul found that real life is found in a total givenness to Christ. A relationship with Christ isn't something we add to the mix of life. It's the foundation that shapes the whole – the centre point of everything we do and are. Christ takes all the pieces of our lives and reshapes them into something of true value in the plan of God. And perhaps, that's part of sharing Christ's suffering – allowing ourselves to be transformed by him – laying aside what we once counted as valuable and significant, to focus on our relationship with Christ.

At the end of the passage Paul uses the image of the athlete who knows that they've yet to reach their goal and keeps pressing on, 'I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.' I used to seriously train in power lifting, and from time to time attained a personal best. It's a moment of deep satisfaction. But I learnt that I could only revel in that satisfaction for a day, because if I stayed there, that's the best I would ever achieve. So, after twenty-four hours, I laid my latest PB aside and set out to achieve my next goal. That's how the Christian life is. We can't revel in the past but look to what God is calling us onto, 'forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.' There's never a sense of 'having arrived' – rather pressing on, reaching out to the new things that God has in store for us.

Of course, moving forward with Christ is a real challenge, and yes, sometimes I feel like giving up. But then I find, as Paul did, that I can press on 'because Christ Jesus has made me his own.' Christ has taken hold of me – grasped me and made me his. To know Christ is to be held, to be taken hold of, by one who loves us utterly – who walks with us as we journey onwards – through this life, through death, until finally, we know resurrection. So, I wonder, where is Christ taking you.

*Alister Hendery  
Hastings – 8.10.23*