

Philippians 3:2-14 HT 10.00 am & Zoom 4.10.2020

One of the casualties of the pandemic has been the Olympics – and we all hope that they can go ahead next year. Imagine for a moment that you are an athlete preparing for the 400 metres. (I realise that takes even more imagination for some of us than for others!) You have two targets – the first is to qualify for the team. The second is then to get in as good shape as possible in time for the actual races. There are athletes now who have known for some time that they have qualified for the team and who are facing the challenge of staying in tip top form for whenever the time may be. Once in the team they forget about the first challenge and focus on the final race.

If we use this analogy for the Christian life, there are two questions: How do we get in Jesus' team? and how do we live when we are in it? In his letter to the Philippians Paul addresses these questions and shows that they were putting their energy in the wrong place. Unlike an athlete who has to work hard to get in the team – a Christian joins the team by putting our trust in Jesus – we don't need to do any more – it's like we have turned up for the qualifying heats and found we have been given a bye. However, having joined the team, there is lots to do to work with Jesus for the sake of his kingdom.

The problem in Philippi, as I suspect it is often for us – is that we get it the wrong way round – because we haven't learned to be confident about the free gift of salvation in Jesus we continue to work at getting into the team rather than concentrating on what a team player does. All our focus then turns to trying to be good enough to be regarded by God as a Christian and not, as Gerald reminded us last week, of finding our purpose inside God's team

In Philippi many of the Christians had not come from a Jewish background and were vulnerable to Jewish Christians coming along and telling them that unless they performed Jewish rituals (especially circumcision) they were not proper Christians - they hadn't made the team yet.

When Paul heard about this he got really angry - listen to how he referred to these people: v.2 ²Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh. "Dogs" was a particularly clever insult - because that was what some zealous Jews would call gentiles. Circumcision was the outward sign, given to the Jews that a man belonged to the community of God's people. In v3. Paul states that we are the true circumcision - i.e. we are the true community of God's people - who worship God from our hearts - not just by ritual - and who put our trust in Jesus Christ not in anything that we might do or achieve.

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Of course, if it was helpful to rely on things he had achieved himself, Paul would have no problem - he could outshine these Judaizers by both his birthright and his zealotry as a Jew. (vv4-6)

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:
⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.

Having heard all his credentials; v.7 comes as a bit of a shock: v.7 ⁷But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. In the past he had really believed that his background and lifestyle meant that he would receive salvation - that he was on God's team. It was only when Jesus called him on the Damascus road that he realised how wrong he had been. We can only know Jesus through putting our trust in him - and not by relying on what we have done - so the very things that Paul used to be proud of - became a problem when they prevented him from seeing his own need of Jesus.

No wonder that in v.8 Paul refers to his good works as **** (Refuse is a polite translation)

vv8a-9 ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—

But although there is nothing - other than believing in Jesus - that we can do to achieve salvation - it is not true to say that having become Christians we then sit back and do nothing. In baptism - the sign that has replaced circumcision - we become united with Jesus in his death that we might share in the resurrection from the dead. This resurrection has truth in the past, present and future.

In the past: When we become Christians, we enter into new life with Jesus - we are raised from the death-hold of sin to the new life of relationship with Jesus. Just as with the birth of a child – we are not half born – all who have put their trust in Jesus have entered into this new life

In the present: By being united with Christ we also share in his sufferings. This includes:

1. the suffering produced by temptation,
2. the suffering from sharing God's heart for a broken world,
3. and the suffering from the persecution that comes with the rejection of Christianity.

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In this suffering we also experience God's resurrection power taking us through the situation.

1. There is new strength to resist from the one who understands temptation – 1 Cor 10 ¹³No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.
2. Calling us to action through prayer, giving and evangelism
3. Paul had already seen in Jesus that the suffering caused by persecution can become the means of salvation – supremely by Jesus on the cross- then following his determination to praise God in prison he had seen the gospel spread.

In the future: vv12-14 ¹²Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Our perspective on life is never that this is all there is. We keep our eyes on the future promise of being with Jesus in Heaven.

Conclusion

When our feelings doubt the truth of our faith – we need to turn to the facts that having put our trust in Jesus we have been born into his family. Any fear that we need to behave differently to be a true Christian is a lie. However to live out what we are includes being united with Christ as brothers and sisters, but also sharing in his sufferings.

This does not mean we will be the Christians we want to be – even Paul admitted to not have achieved perfection –but he pressed on anticipating a day in the future when, on the far side of death – Jesus would complete the work done in him – and that will happen to us as well.

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The Collect of the day for Trinity 17

Almighty God,
you have made us for yourself,
and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you:
pour your love into our hearts and draw us to yourself,
and so bring us at last to your heavenly city
where we shall see you face to face;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

The Lord's Prayer is said

As our Saviour taught us, so we pray

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**