

My Heart's Desire - Philippians 3: 1-14

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Matthew 20: 20-28

It is human nature to define ourselves based on what we do, or on our family heritage. Very early on in meeting someone, we often ask, '*What do you do?*' or '*Where's your family from?*' Yes, they're part of getting to know someone, but can also betray a deeper desire for identification.

In the summer of 2010 I was made redundant from an organisation for which I'd worked for 26 years. One of the most painful moments was being in an office in the HR department and being asked to hand in my ID badge. Though only a badge, it represented a huge part of my identity. It spoke of my loyalty to the organisation, my status as a manager within it, and the successes that I'd had over many years. And now that was all gone, my post had been deleted in a re-organisation and, although it was not supposed to, it felt very personal. And they wanted my ID badge back, lest I try and pretend that I was still an employee. For the weeks afterwards that I was in-between jobs, I dreaded being in a social situation where someone would ask '*And what do you do?*' for it suddenly felt that I didn't do very much at all. What was my identity, and was it enough?

Chapter 3 of Paul's letter to the church in Philippi begins with a theme that runs through the whole of his letter – rejoice! *Rejoice in the Lord!* But then he launches into a very serious warning to them, the language of which can sound to us as being very harsh. '*Watch out for those dogs,*' he says, '*those mutilators of the flesh.*' Words that have very little meaning for us in 21st Century England. So, what was going on? What was it that Paul was getting so hot under the collar about?

Well, in Galatia, just a few years before, the churches he founded had almost at once been infiltrated by Jewish Christians. Paul was himself, of course, a Jewish Christian, but these ones, unlike him, were insisting that Gentile converts to Christianity had only come half way. What they now needed to do was to take on the Jewish law as well. Otherwise, they remained Gentile outsiders, '*dogs*' as some Jews referred to them. They needed to perform the good works of the Torah – the Jewish law book. But they needed, above all, to be circumcised. For, unless they did all this, they couldn't claim the same identity as the Jewish Christians did. They weren't proper Christians!

At the time of writing his letter, this problem hadn't yet arisen in Philippi but Paul is aware that it could at any moment, hence his warning for them to *'watch out'*. Watch out for those who will lead you down the wrong path. Watch out for those who insist that only keeping the law will do as membership in God's people. Watch out for those who believe that you need an indelible outward sign, an identity marker, to prove you're part of God's family.

'For, if you go down that road, you've got it all wrong. And how do I know? Well listen to my story.' And then he states his impeccable pedigree as a long-standing member of God's elect. *'Circumcised 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; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless.'* And his reason for telling them this? Because, for all he had, it was leading nowhere because he'd failed to recognise Jesus as the Messiah. He'd refused to acknowledge the very person that his Jewish heritage had led him to expect – God's chosen one, the Saviour of the World.

And, in *not* recognising and acknowledging that Jesus Christ was indeed the promised Messiah, he'd persecuted those who did. Until that day on the road to Damascus when his life was turned upside down. Where everything he'd previously relied upon became insignificant. Where the scales were literally lifted from his eyes and he saw Christ for who he was, and his life changed beyond recognition. Saul, the devout Pharisee, who had kept every law going, and had defended Judaism to the point of persecuting Christians, became Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, who founded churches in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Colossae, Thessalonica and Philippi. Who was in prison for his faith in Jesus Christ. And who would go to his death for his faith in Jesus Christ.

Was it worth it, he might be asking in this letter. Was it worth it? And he says these words:

'But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What 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 and be found in him.'

It's that time of the year when Frances has been busy preparing the church accounts for the APCM. On one side is the income, or the profit. On the other is the expenditure, or the losses. The hope is that the accounts at least balance

or show a profit or credit. In looking at Paul's credentials, his Jewish heritage – he loved the patriarchs, honoured the Torah, worshipped at Temple and synagogue, and soaked himself in the Hebrew Scriptures – you'd have thought his profit column was pretty healthy! But Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus led him to draw up a revised balance sheet, where he reveals that his old status and privileges did *not*, in *any* way, add up to the joys of salvation in Christ. In fact, everything that was previously profitable to him he has decisively written off, consigning them to the rubbish dump. He's moved them from the credit column firmly into the debit column. This is tough talk from Paul, especially about things that were so precious to him, things that formed his identity and defined who he was. But in *his* eyes, knowing Jesus surpasses everything else. It becomes such a huge credit, that everything else is now regarded as a debit, a loss.

'I want to know Christ' our passage today concludes. *'I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.'* The extraordinary re-evaluation of his life which Paul has undergone gives him a completely new ambition – above all, to *know* Jesus more and more. He says that he hasn't yet arrived at the place he wants to be, but that he's well on his way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for him. He doesn't count himself an expert – though we might want to disagree with him in this – but as someone with his eye on the goal, towards which God beckons us all – towards Jesus. And Paul is off and running, and not looking back.

In Paul's telling of his Christian story, there are similarities between *his* story and the story of Jesus in the preceding chapter, in the passage we read last week, of Christ *'being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.'* How different this is to the scenario in today's gospel reading from Matthew 20, where the mother of James and John asks Jesus to grant that her boys sit at Jesus' side – one on his left and the other on his right – when he comes into his kingdom. The *best* seats. Status. Position. Reward. And then a fight breaks out amongst the disciples when they hear what's just occurred. And Jesus tells them the very thing, that Paul, decades later, works out for himself and confirms in his letter to the Philippians – *'that whoever wants to be great among you must be a servant, just as the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'* Came not to be served, but to serve.

What is *your* Christian story? If you drew up a balance sheet of your life, what would be on the profit side, and what would be on the debit? Where does *your* confidence lie? How would *you* grade your past compared with your present?

What does *your* heart desire? Is it, like Paul, to know Christ more? Not just '*knowing about*' Jesus the Messiah, but knowing him in a *personal* relationship. Not just *believing* in him, but *trusting* in him. Trusting that he loves you. Loves you so much that he went to the cross for you. Went to the cross, defeated death and rose in glory so he can be with you always.

This is the reason for Paul's joy, despite being in prison, chained to a Roman guard, not knowing whether his trial, when it came, would lead to the death penalty. Rejoice in the Lord, he tells them. Be glad in God. For we have much to be glad for.

Let us pray:

Lord, as we read about Paul counting everything as loss compared to the knowledge of Christ, open our hearts to receive your Son, that we might live for him in this world until we become citizens of your heavenly kingdom. Amen.