

Notes of a Sermon preached by Roland Price at St Mary's Cholsey

14 Oct 2018

Phil 3:1-11 The only profit that counts (with Luke 1:66-end)

The practice of hand-written letter writing seems to be diminishing rapidly. When Thea and I lived in Florida for a year soon after we were married, we wrote about a letter a week to our parents. We would put down a summary of all the things we were doing (well most of them). We wanted to keep them informed. We often would get to the end of what we thought we wanted to say in a particular letter, and then realise we still had more to say.

Paul, coming to the end of what he thinks he wants to say in his letter to the Philippians, finds he still has many things he would like to talk about. So 'finally' turns into 'and subsequently..' and he wants to repeat things he has already written about. But then preachers repeat a teaching to remind their hearers of important aspects of the Christian faith. (Liturgy is appreciated by most Anglicans. This helps them not worry about whether what is being said or done is the truth, and they can get on thinking about how the liturgy informs us of the faith). This can be frustrating for those who have heard (and understood) a point lots of times already, and healthy for those who have forgotten or have noted it only for the first time. I just hope and pray that you won't get frustrated with things in this sermon you have already heard and know and know well.

Paul has a number of points that he wants his hearers to know. That is why he writes to them. One point is that he wants every Christian to have joy in their faith, joy that God has most amazing love for us, and gives us great and precious promises, made originally to the Children of Israel and now given also to the Gentiles, and joy that we know we belong to the Father through the death and resurrection of his only son Jesus.

Paul however, wants to emphasise some important points that he has made previously, so he is going to repeat them again (and again.. and again). For Paul, it is better to be safe than sorry. And repetition in different contexts is a good way of learning and remembering. What is more, spiritual joy is the best safeguard against error.

An important point for Paul is that the Philippians should steer clear of those 'barking dogs', those Judaizers who have evil reasons for insisting on circumcising new Gentile converts to Christ. Fortunately, these scumbags are all bark and no bite. The evil is that they are only interested in appearances in human terms, not the truth. What they do is just a useless mutilation of the body. It's an illusion of truth; it is false news

The real believers says Paul are those who have their hearts circumcised by the Holy Spirit of God. They worship God, led by the Spirit.

The Judaizers put their confidence in circumcision, that is, what is done in the flesh. They claim adherence to the Law of Moses. They are proud of being strict Jews. But to their consternation whatever they say about their positions and achievements, Paul can top them all. He has many reasons to be confident of his relationship with God through who he is and what he has achieved in the flesh.

He lists his credentials to support his claim:

- A legitimate birth; he has pure Jewish blood
- a precise legal position and high status in Jewish society,
- circumcised on the eighth day after his birth, (it is more honourable to be done as an infant rather than as a man)
- from the elite tribe of Benjamin, who was descended from Jacob's wife Rachel, and not from another tribe which had one of the maid servants to Rachel and Leah
- zealous for the law, he was a Pharisee, trained under Gamaliel, one of the greatest teachers of his generation
- blameless in terms of ceremonial righteousness, in the eyes of men blameless, he had achieved legal perfection
- a fiery defender of the purity of his religion, even to the point of persecuting the Christian church, which had claims to replace Judaism

But after he met the risen Jesus on the Damascus Road, Paul was aware that, even though he could point to all these credentials, he did not profit from them in terms of his relationship to God. They did not make him acceptable to God, compared with the

radical alternative of him expressing personal faith in Jesus and what he has done for us; that is, knowing Christ Jesus as his Lord.

One of the ongoing themes of sermons in this church is the need for each of us to be right with God if we are to spend eternity with him. In other words, we need a righteousness that a holy God can accept. The early Christians realised, we cannot achieve an adequate righteousness by our own efforts, or even with the help of other people, or the Law of Moses as the Judaizers claimed. No human being can achieve that. The law is a school master to bring us to faith in Christ. No-one can become righteous before God by simply keeping the law. Neither can we do it collectively. So, qualifying for eternity with God looks hopeless, except for the fact that there was one person who does have a righteousness of his own which is acceptable to God, namely his Only Son Jesus Christ. He laid aside his divinity and became a man among us. His people, the Jews, rejected him and had him crucified by the Romans. But God, who approved what his Son had done, raised him from death to new life, eternal life, and he now sits at the right hand of the Father where he waits for the conquest of his enemies. Being right with God is something none of us can achieve by our own efforts, we can only do so through the grace of our Heavenly Father who loved us so much he sent his son to die for us on the cross and to be raised back to life, eternal life, through his power. This means that each person is clothed as it were with the righteousness of Christ as a covering, and God only sees his righteousness when he looks at us.

To reach this truth, Paul has three considerations. Whatever Paul gained in terms of achievement and position in this world he considered as loss for the sake of Christ. He put Jesus first. He considered that everything a loss compared with knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake he lost all things. He considered them rubbish that he may gain Christ. He wanted to have the righteousness of Christ, not his own based on the law, but through his faith in Jesus. His righteousness that was of his own making he counted as loss in order to the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

Paul did not acquire Jesus' righteousness gradually. He was transported from legal bondage into Christian freedom at once, without any gradual transition. When? On the

Damascus road. Paul says that he gave up all that stuff which he would otherwise be very proud of, so that he could (i) know Christ personally (ii) experience his resurrection power, (iii) be a partner in his sufferings, and (iv) go all the way with him to death

And now, no matter what the Jewish teachers' credentials are, Paul was tearing the law up and throwing it in the trash, along with everything else he used to take credit for. Why? Because of Jesus Christ. Yes! All the things Paul once regarded as important were counted as redundant, as rubbish. For Paul, nothing could compare with the tremendous privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as his Master, first hand; everything else he had once thought significant in his life he disposed of, just like dog-dung. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Jesus and be embraced by him, Paul's ancestral purity in the Tribe of Benjamin, circumcised on the eighth day, a Pharisee, having attained legal perfection, and was devastating the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, gave him, he thought, privileged access to God. But there was no profit in any of these things. It is only by what God has done for us through the death of Jesus on the cross, by which he imputes to us the righteousness of Jesus, which we gain by faith in Him that we can really profit from what God has done for us in Christ.

CT Studd (1860 – 1931) a famous English cricketer, who went out to China with Hudson Taylor, and later as a missionary to Africa. He said, "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him,"

The curious among you may have wondered why the Gospel for today has been selected by me to be Luke 1:66-end. To my sadness there is no time for us to ask this question in groups this morning. Can I suggest that the home groups which study Phil 3:1-11 ask the question "What are the similarities between the ministries of John the Baptist and the Apostle Paul, and what are the differences?"

Roland

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